

EXPLORING FEAR AND FREUD'S *THE UNCANNY*

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Fear is one of the oldest and most basic of human emotions. In this thesis, I will explore the topic of fear in relation to literature, both a staple of the horror genre as well as a device in literary works, as well as in my own writings. In addition, I will use Sigmund Freud's theory of the "uncanny" as a possible device to examine the complexities of fear and its effects both on the mind and body through the medium of literature, and, more specifically, where and how these notions are used within my own short stories. By exploring how and why certain fears are generated, we may be able to better examine our own reactions in this regard.

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PART I
PREFACE

The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.

FDR, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1933

In the fall of 2003, I traveled to the small East Texas town of Jefferson. Once the second biggest city in Texas in the 1800s due to riverboat traffic coming up from New Orleans, it sits perched on the edge of the bayou about thirty minutes from the Louisiana border. I came on a Monday, pulling off the freeway just as dusk fell. The narrow, well-kept streets were home to various autumn displays—bales of hay, scarecrows, pumpkins and cornstalks. Gentle lights twinkled behind glass store fronts and great willow trees swayed as I parked next to an old-fashioned building. The quiet of this small town was deafening after the hum of the tires on the road, the whoosh of the air-conditioning and the blare of advertisements and songs on the radio. You could hear the music of the city in the rustle of wind through the leaves, and the chirping of crickets and frogs jumping into the bayou behind the hotel. There were no signs of people on the street or in the buildings. There were no sounds of traffic. Yet, the painted wooden sign beside a bale of hay and next to the door proclaimed the building as The Jefferson Hotel. This was the right place.

Fear was what had motivated me to drive for hours. Fear of the unknown. Fear of possibilities. I wanted to spend the night in a well-documented haunted establishment. The guest stories ranged from unexplained sounds to mattresses and bedding rising off the bed, to ghostly images caught on film and sensations of someone or something lying down next to you in bed. Guests have reported waking up in the middle of the night to someone whispering in their ears. There's something uncanny about all of these stories that terrified, yet excited me. I wanted to experience something strange,

frightening and fun like scores of other guests had before me. The intensity and awkwardness of fear is something that has fascinated me for as long as I can remember. In my writing, I want to capture this emotion and present it to the readers and/or explore the theme through my characters. I often wonder how I would react in certain situations created by horror literature and movies and my own writing. By traveling to stay one night at the Jefferson Hotel, I was, in a way, putting myself in the footsteps of fictional characters.

In his essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature”, H.P. Lovecraft writes, “[t]he oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear” (11). Yet, fear is often recognized as a negative emotion. Sigmund Freud realized this; the history of aesthetics has neglected to study the uncanny. Modernism represents a change in aesthetics, focusing more on the ugly and grotesque and “The Uncanny,” written in 1919, is Freud’s contribution. In the essay, he states that most studies and scholarly papers “prefer to concern themselves with what is beautiful, attractive and sublime; that is, with feelings of a positive nature ... rather than with the opposite feelings of repulsion and distress” (217). Freud specifically examines the effect of fear and what is frightening in literature with the intention of proving that the emotions come from things the reader has repressed, or the familiar.

So what is the uncanny exactly? “[The uncanny] is undoubtedly related to what is frightening—to what arouses dread and horror; equally certainly, too, the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with what excites fear in general” (217). In other words, the uncanny is a term that is used to describe fear not from the unknown but from something we once knew and perhaps repressed. In doing so, the familiar has also become alien and unknown. Freudian psychoanalytic theory

states that two basic drives motivate all human emotion, thoughts and behaviors—sex and aggression. The latter is also known as the death instinct and we repress a great deal of both. It is no accident that horror literature and movies contain quite a bit of sex and death. In Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the reader cannot deny the underlying sexuality contained in the novel. Dracula is able to kill or offer immortal life by either stealing or sharing bodily fluids. In "The Uncanny," Freud takes these theories of repression further and divides them into concepts. Freud assigns these terms—the double, animism, magic and sorcery, the omnipotence of thoughts, man's attitude to death, involuntary repetition and the castration complex—as factors which can turn something merely frightening into something uncanny. These terms are specific examples of things which can create an uncanny feeling in literature. Later in this essay, I will discuss Freud's concepts in greater length and compare them with my own short stories.

While one of the common forces in horror literature is the exploration of fear, how do we write about fear? What is frightening? Fear is a strong, primal emotion that creates the strange sensation of being attracted and repulsed at the same time. Lovecraft says that the oldest human fear is fear of the unknown. Certainly, this is true. Humans have been conquering the unknown ever since our existence on Earth. However, fear of the unknown can also be seen as the fear of possibilities. Children don't fear touching a hot stove until they do and then they know of the consequences. Fear of the dark isn't necessarily because of the absence of light but rather what dangers could be lurking within it. But speaking from a more technical point of writing, to create something fearful, fantastic or unbelievable, a writer needs to set the unknown against more concrete details. The author should provide a base of things known or familiar in order to provide

the greater contrast against what is unknown. For example, if a story was about flying pigs, the oddness of this occurrence would be amplified by providing a world that seems normal to the reader in every other way. In “The Uncanny,” Freud provides the example of reading fairy tales. These are fantastic, unreal stories that do not provide instances of the uncanny because of the completely made up world. In the movie *Alien*, it is easier to believe the fantastic setting and situations because the viewer sees familiar human interaction and emotions, not to mention plot structure that mirrors many voyage narratives.

My goal as a writer is to create stories that leave a lasting impression on the reader and if possible, to explore fear and the frightening. H.P. Lovecraft, one of the masters of dark fiction, discusses the ability to generate weird or frightening fiction in his essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature.”

The one test of the really weird is simply this—whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe’s utmost rim. (16)

Why do I like horror? Things that are scary have been an interest of mine as far as I can remember. It’s a personal fascination that grew from watching television shows like *The Twilight Zone*, *Scooby Doo* and horror movies. As a horror film aficionado, I applaud the instances where the movie creates a genuinely creepy moment. The twins in *The Shining*, the girl getting dragged across the ceiling and slashed open in her sleep in *Nightmare on Elm Street*, the grandfather in the *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* who is too

weak to hold the hammer but tries to brain the girl anyways—these are the kind of moments where you feel that fear, primal and instinctive, well up inside and raise the hair on your neck. Fear creates bodily effects on a viewer of a horror movie. In literature, it is more difficult to replicate this since horror seems perfect for the visual medium of cinema. However, horror literature can construct tales that seem more real and personal due to the narrative techniques and the slower pace of reading versus viewing a movie. Writing about fear and trying to recreate it requires more than just imagination and general themes. Any kind of writing requires specific attention to detail and the technical ability to produce good fiction. In literature, the frightening and uncanny are the moments such as when Frankenstein's creation first gazes upon his creator with watery eyes or when the men discover the iron-gray strand of hair on the pillow next to Homer Barron's corpse in William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily."

In the following section of the essay, I discuss basic themes and structure of short stories that I've recently written. While I mention some basic aspects of story-telling, I also discuss the frightening and Freud's concepts of the uncanny in my own work. These examples should provide greater insight into the exploration of fear, where it comes from and why. Hopefully, this discussion also validates much of Freud's analysis of the uncanny as it pertains to horror literature.

In "The Last Snowflake", the oldest of the stories included in this collection, I explore the themes of change and uncertainty. Cheyenne is a young high school girl in love with a senior named Jericho. She is afraid that when he leaves for college that he will forget about her. Meanwhile, Jericho only appears interested in having sex with Cheyenne, something she has not allowed to happen yet. Cheyenne fears change. She

fears change to the extent that she is already daydreaming about going back to her childhood, when everything appeared to be carefree. Her fear is a very real fear that the reader can empathize with to an extent. The snowy Chicago afternoons of her youth are a long ways from the hot, humid Texas summers.

When I wrote this story, all I had was a single terrifying image etched into my mind—the stars falling from the sky like blazing snowflakes. Through a couple of rewrites, I developed a more somber and realistic story that deals with rape. Cheyenne doesn't appear able to think realistically about her relationship with Jericho. She is naïve and immature but she hopes against her misgivings that Jericho will be a standup guy. Jericho cares about her but knows that college will open up a whole new world to dating. As the drive progresses, Cheyenne knows that they are driving out to the Saucer, the clearing where kids go to make out, but she doesn't protest enough to change the situation. Not only does she allow Jericho to take her out there again, she willingly drinks alcohol already knowing that the last time they were there, she almost lost her virginity. Cheyenne concocts a fantasy about UFOs, the clearing and love but when she comes back from her alcohol-fueled daydream, she discovers that the violent act of sex has nothing to do with love. Physically unable to resist Jericho strength, she retreats back into her head again, saying, "I wish it would snow. I'll never ask for anything else..." The rape is the literal undoing of Cheyenne's fragile world and misguided dreams. The apocalyptic ending is surreal and whether or not the reader takes it for being real, the destruction is there. Fear is in witnessing the destruction.

"The Last Snowflake" is not a typical horror story in that it does not deal with monsters other than the human kind. As the story progresses, it appears to be a story

about one-sided love or lost dreams. However, the reader becomes aware of Cheyenne's internal state and we learn to sympathize with her because we've all been in her situation at one time or another. As Jericho rapes her, the reader wonders why she doesn't physically resist him more than she does. Instead, she seems to give up and chooses close her eyes to the truth, wishing for snow, wishing for the simple days of her childhood again. The uncanny in this situation is that Cheyenne seems to have the ability to create an ideal, vengeful self. This double is a stronger person and through magic, sorcery, or imagination, she is able to have the last word. The theme of the double is an old one throughout literature. The double can be a doppelganger, a brother or sister, shadow, or split personalities. It is yin and yang, mirrors and reflections, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Freud believes that the theme of the double was originally insurance against the destruction of the ego. "When all is said and done, the quality of uncanniness can only come from the fact of the 'double' being a creation dating back to a very early mental stage, long since surmounted — a stage, incidentally, at which it wore a more friendly aspect. The 'double' has become a thing of terror" (Freud 236) In my story, the reader tangles with the possibility that Cheyenne could have the power to create not only her reality in the end but that of everyone. She is the Stephen King's Carrie here, trying to enjoy her prom in the face of cruelty, or in Cheyenne's case, trying to salvage some bit of comfort while her world collapses. Her thoughts become literal, the stars fall from the sky like heavy snowflakes and Cheyenne's destruction has been shared.

I don't think that it matters whether or not the reader believes that Cheyenne causes the stars to fall from the sky or not. But the vision of the night sky falling like millions of white-hot streamers becomes terrifying and intense, even if we choose to see

it only from Cheyenne's point of view. Again, it becomes a literal symbol of her hopes falling apart. I hoped that the ending would be sudden and horrific, if not unexpected, after the rest of the story being fairly grounded in realism. Flannery O'Connor says that details are key to whether or not a reader stays around to the ending. "Fiction is an art that calls for the strictest attention to the real—whether the writer is writing a naturalistic story or a fantasy" (15). In her essay "The Epistemology of the Horror Story", Susan Stewart also comments on the blurring between what is real and what is fantasy. "The boundary between the real and fictive, the interpretations of experience by the audience and the characters, is continually drawn and effaced" (35). Stewart notices that this blurring is constant action that is maintained through continued efforts in the storytelling. In a reversed but similar way, the reader entertains the fictional idea of the sky falling because of the rest of the story is grounded in concrete details of reality in the same way that the reader allows Gregor Samsa the possibility of turning into a cockroach in the beginning of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*.

In "Kheller's Treats," I tried a different approach to the horror story. The idea of a central character overstepping acceptable boundaries is not new to horror. In Hawthorne's "The Birthmark", Aylmer is a vain and egotistical man searching to become god-like. While having the most beautiful wife around, all he can do is stare at her birthmark until it consumes him. In his quest to remove the birthmark, he kills Georgiana. Like Aylmer, Randy is an unlikable character. But unlike Aylmer, Randy has neither lofty goals nor redeeming qualities. He is ugliness personified. This type of narrative is often seen in the horror genre—the fall or ruin tale, which is sometimes also known as the quest for knowledge. A character searching for knowledge and truth is a

narrative known in epics and other genres but it is also quite common in horror narratives. “Horror stories are predominantly concerned with knowledge as a theme. The two most frequent plot structures in horror narratives are the Discovery Plot and the Overreacher Plot” (Carroll 57). This Overreacher Plot deals with a central character that searches for hidden, unholy or forbidden knowledge. In “Kheller’s Treats”, part of Randy’s downfall is simply because of his selfish and mean character traits. He lusts over an underage female, he drinks too much, he takes advantage of others and he is an ingrate. But Randy also searches for knowledge; he wants to find out what’s in the snow cones. Even though his character is ugly, which is mirrored in the harsh narrative voice, the reader doesn’t necessarily delight in his downfall. When the demon comes to town and begins selling snow cones of madness on his street corner, the reader still hopes that it’s not too late for Randy to do what’s right. We still see that he is human and naturally expect that human nature will help pull him out of a diabolical situation. Kheller is the devil or a demon; the ultimate tempter of overindulgence. He is the dark shadow, empowered with evil and sorcery. When two evils are pitted together, the lesser of the two garner the sympathies.

One of Sigmund Freud’s concepts of the uncanny is the castration complex. Without going into too much explanation, Freud believed that a lot of anxiety can be generated from the idea of being castrated, physically or metaphorically. In horror literature, castration also refers to the removal of any body part or, in general, not being whole. Many horror movies and stories are full of dismemberments and beheadings, blood and gore. In “Kheller’s Treats,” there are examples of this in the neighbor’s blood splattered on the wall, and the poodle trying to pull the ear off one of the dead. Basically,

any depiction of the human body not being complete or normal is distressing. Initially, Randy has violent thoughts but when things begin to go to hell, these scenes of destruction and death work double to both terrify Randy and repulse the reader. While it is easy to see why this concept is abundant in the horror genre, very little representation actually appears in this sample of my writing.

In this story, I again use the theme of a double in both Randy and Mr. Kheller's characters. While Randy is an unlikable character, Mr. Kheller is much worse. The double is a perfect theme for what is uncanny. Freud's essay begins by trying to explain this phenomenon linguistically (219). The German word *heimlich* can roughly translate to "homely" or familiar and by adding a "*un*" before the word, we've reversed the meaning. He equates this with being able to say that what is uncanny is frightening, by definition, but because of something unknown. However, he further demonstrates that while *unheimlich* is the opposite of *heimlich*, the original form of the word itself represents a dichotomy. By reading dictionary definitions, the word *heimlich* means both familiar and unknown. Freud believes that this representation of opposite meanings within the same word is also expressed in the uncanny—what is truly frightening is caused by both the possibilities contained within the unknown and the return to what is familiar.

Besides simply being a double, Mr. Kheller also appears to be able to use magic or sorcery. Freud says that we call a person "uncanny" only when we attribute evil intentions to them. "But that is not all; in addition to this we must feel that his intentions to harm us are going to be carried out with the help of special powers" (244). In this case, Mr. Kheller seems to be able to create snow cones of madness, appear at will and move rapidly without being seen. The use of magic is something that is not natural; yet,

it is strangely familiar. As young children, we easily believe in magical abilities and wish for them. Disney and other kids' movies are often full of magical creatures or creatures that can perform magic. When this is revisited in more realistic and/or adult situations, it helps to create a feeling of uncertainty. We wonder about the truthfulness of the story we're reading. Even though "Kheller's Treats" is not a first person story, it strongly feels like it is narrated by Randy's character. The reader wonders about the incongruity of Kheller, the pounding midnight calliope music, the babies hanging on hooks underneath the eaves and his ability to read thoughts. The reader tries to decide if he/she is viewing reality or a breakdown in Randy's sanity filtered through the eyes of the narrator. This is one of the best things a writer can do in horror literature—blur the line between reality and fantasy so that the reader must always draw their own conclusions. This quote from "The Uncanny" demonstrates this as well as reemphasizing a point I discuss earlier in the essay.

It is true that the writer creates a kind of uncertainty in us in the beginning by not letting us know, no doubt purposely, whether he is taking us into the real world or into a purely fantastic one of his own creation...we must bow to his decision and treat his setting as though it were real for as long as we put ourselves into this hands. (231)

By contrasting the unknown against the known, I am able to maintain a fairly believable story in which the world as we know it, and as Randy knows it, slowly dissolves around him.

"The Last Flood" is a story about family but more specifically, about brothers. The narrator is a young boy on the edge of puberty, just beginning to think about the

pretty girl who sits in the corner of his class. When they first chance upon the strange rain puddle, the narrator is intrigued while his younger brother, Charles, is frightened. The reason for Charles's fear of the dark puddle is unknown at first other than "it smells bad". While appearing to be the voice of reason in the beginning, Charles attitude changes until he is completely obsessed with the spreading puddle. The mother is almost nowhere to be seen in the story yet we don't fault her for trying to do what she can for her sons. From the few glimpses we see of her, we know that she is neglecting them by leaving them alone so often but she must do so in order to provide for them. The father is missing and while the reader never knows why, we understand that his disappearance weighs heavily on the narrator. In a sense, he has become the father figure, expressing regret and sorrow for not being able to save his brother and mother by the story's end. What's frightening is that he continues to try and live life in a normal manner after their disappearances. Trying to act normal in the face of this trauma is abnormal. Involuntary repetition is another aspect of the uncanny. Without going into too much detail, Freud discusses "the dominance in the unconscious mind of a 'compulsion to repeat' proceeding from the instinctual impulses ... a compulsion powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle" (238). Basically, this involves chance, seeing patterns in otherwise incongruent instances and also gives rise to the belief of superstition. Despite the loss of his mother and brother, the narrator goes about doing the dishes, an activity he may not have even done in normal circumstances. Also, he finds himself repeatedly drawn to the puddle in spite of what he feels about it. Most people wouldn't behave in the ways the young narrator does and these instances provide moments of fear and unease within the story.

In workshop, many comments were made on the creepiness of the descriptions and actions. The return of a dead boy and the parental actions of his lonely brother work because both are odd. It's morbid but there's a tenderness that creates profundity to the story. The narrator's fear is a genuine fear of loss and abandonment. When Charles returns from the dead, the narrator knows that he is no longer his brother. Yet, the narrator is compassionate, bringing Charles in, helping him undress and crawl into bed where they lay together listening to the storm. Charles tries to tell him how magnificent the other side is and that he wouldn't want to remain here when the others come through. The narrator asks Charles about the pain of death, afraid of crossing that threshold. He also asks about his mother and Charles replies that she is happier than ever. In this section of the story, there are several things that are functioning to generate an uncanny atmosphere. There is something familiar about the puddle and it being a metaphor for a door to the other side. It is like being birthed, leaving the familiarity of the womb or dying and crossing over into the unknown. The narrator inquires about the life on the other side and this touches on another one of Freud's discussions on the uncanny. Man's attitude towards death deals with the belief systems in the dead and the afterlife. We attribute religious significance or believe in ghosts. Throughout the Middle Ages, people believed in God and ghosts, witches and demons. "And throughout the period, it must be remembered, there existed amongst educated and uneducated alike a most unquestioning faith in every form of the supernatural; from the gentlest doctrines of Christianity to the most monstrous morbidities of witchcraft and black magic" (Lovecraft 19). These beliefs often guide the way a person acts in this life. For the narrator, he listens to the double of his brother, another example of the *heimlich/unheimlich*, and takes his words into

consideration. Silently, the narrator struggles with his fear of dying and his desire to be reunited with his mother and brother on the other side.

Another powerful example of a device that inspires a sense of uncanniness is what Freud calls animism, which is when an inanimate object moves or speaks. Chucky in the movie *Child's Play* is an example of a horror film based on this idea. In "The Last Flood," the narrator should know that when Charles returns, he isn't alive. "He didn't look well. In fact, he looked dead. His skin was bluish and pale, the veins in his neck like dark tree roots. Entangled with swamp weeds, his hair thrashed in the tempest." In his own words, the narrator realizes that Charles is dead but allows him in. These descriptions work on a level within the reader more so than with the narrator. He doesn't react negatively but the reader understands that dead things aren't suppose to be reanimated. Freud says that during childhood we entertain the idea of dolls moving or talking to us. It is an infantile wish or desire. Girls have tea parties with their dolls and guys play with their toy soldiers, occasionally wishing that they will respond to their words and thoughts. On television and in movies, cartoons are full of creatures talking and singing. Today, the thought of inanimate objects moving or talking return us to those familiar feelings and the contrast creates a frightening experience.

The next story in this collection, "The Roar of the Vltava", takes a dramatic turn in narrative voice. After traveling to the Czech Republic in March of 2005, I wanted to capture some of the moments and thoughts that I had during my two week stay. The country is rich with history and folklore but I wanted to replicate my own feelings as an outsider traveling abroad. The first thing you notice about the story is that it's told in first person narrative. "The Roar of the Vltava" is written like a confession so that the reader

gets an upfront seat on the rollercoaster. To further the sensation of taking a ride, I present the story in the present tense, which was the first time I have ever done this. Writing in the present tense gives the story more immediacy and personality. Although this lacks the depth and distance to allow more intellectual digestion, it increases the speed of the experience. Within the story, the narrator imagines a fantastic revenge scenario although he doesn't really want to hurt anyone. While in this meditative state aboard a tour bus, he invites us to become drowsy with him and his musings until the accident plunges them into the icy river. The descriptions here are fairly concrete and visual, borne of personal experience. I was aboard a speeding tour bus that did at one point slip precariously across a snowy bridge while most of the students slept. In "The Roar of the Vltava," I take this experience one step further and imagine the accident, bringing the reader with me. "For what seems like an eternity, there is a strange weightless sensation and I'm disoriented. I'm up out of my seat and my backpack is ahead of me. The darkness outside the window appears to be moving; welcoming us into it, rippling in anticipation". In the previous portions of the "The Roar of the Vltava", the story provides much telling and speculations but at the instance of the accident, it changes to action, often disorientating until the conclusion.

Subconsciously, I was working on many levels in the creation of "The Roar of the Vltava". For one, I started to move away from a plot-driven story. Since everything is filtered through the narrator, our view of reality is very limited to his own. However, the narrator makes no grand assertions of his experience and even doubts himself. He is self-aware as a story-teller and remorseful. Writing the story in this form allowed me to work in greater character details and mannerisms until he seems to be a well-rounded,

believable character. The scene of his humiliation in front of the girl he likes and her peers is something that greatly disturbs the narrator. It becomes the cause of his revenge fantasy. It is at this point that it seems like his thoughts and wishes have come true. We see Freud's example of omnipotence of thoughts again. The narrator, who is also a writer, conjures up this unlikely revenge story in his head and when it seems to happen, he worries that he caused it by merely thinking about it. The power of thoughts and wishes coming true in a way that doesn't bring about good is frightening.

In "The Roar of the Vltava," I put a lot of effort in expanding my scope of writing, not merely just to create frightening and uncanny atmospheres. Already mentioned, I experimented in narrative voice and tense. Also, I tried to write the two main story lines—the humiliation and the accident—so that they paralleled each other in intensity. One part of the story is told in flashback and past tense while the rest is told in present tense. I was worried that the flipping between the two would confuse the readers but in the workshop, there didn't seem to be a problem here. This narrative, while challenging to write, works well with this story. Susan Stewart discusses the importance of narrative in horror, citing that "nowhere are narrative's images of unfolding, of hesitation, of the step and the key more thematically profound and more clearly worked on the level of effect than in the horror story" (33). She claims that each bit of information that the author gives the reader must work to build upon all the details given before in such a way that it will begin to affect the reader. By splitting up the two main storylines in "The Roar of the Vltava", I was hoping that the reader could finally be caught up in narrative time before the accident. I wanted to mix realism with fantasy thoroughly. Stewart says the personal narrative is the best example for realism by

celebrating “the idiosyncracies of personal experience at the same time that it calls forth examples of similar experiences from its audience” (35). While there may be few people who could have a remotely similar experience, hopefully the honesty of the voice and the details of my trip help to create a plausible realism for the reader.

By far the hardest story that I’ve ever written is the last story in this collection—“Thinking of Aurochs and Angels”. Part of the reasoning for this is that I had no idea where I was going with this story. It began in my mind as a scene, the opening one, where I wanted to set the tone. In workshop, several people critiqued the opening by saying that it’s not enough of an attention grabber. If I summarize the opening scene to a sentence—it is a hot, summer day and there is a boy standing on a train trestle, masturbating into the water below—it doesn’t seem so boring. I play up the language, which is something I worked diligently on in this story, and I give the off-putting action a backseat to nature. I defend the opening paragraph because it conveys exactly what I wanted to say in the opening—that Coy Butler really just fades into the background. It works cinematically, as if the opening shot of a movie. And thus, I had the beginning of a strange little story without an ending in sight.

Another part of the reason that “Thinking of Aurochs and Angels” was so difficult to write is that I attempted to make this a character-driven story. Throughout my life, I’ve usually started with an ending of a story in mind and then worked the plot around this end. Instead, I started with a character that seems immature, revolting and a little alarming but after awhile, he became interesting. I also attempted to bring in a “loftier” type of language and make the story poetic despite the subject matter. This took much more time to write instead of the other stories in this collection. In fact, much of it was

written in just the portions that I separate with double spaces. Despite all of the difficulties, I believe that “Thinking of Aurochs and Angels” is the best story that I’ve written to date.

“Thinking of Aurochs and Angels” isn’t really a horror story—not in a traditional sense. If the title doesn’t seem to mesh with what the story is about, it is because it is part of a quote from Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita. Coy is not portrayed as either a villain or a hero. In workshop, the instructor wanted more clarification about his character. Is he a misunderstood young man or is he really an asshole? I believe it is the ambiguity that I present and maintain throughout the story that makes this question difficult to answer. Most people cannot be classified into black and white categories and I wanted to reflect this in Coy’s character. Again, the theme of the double is at work in this story. There is the Coy that is angry, narcissistic and appears to be on the edge of violence. Then there is the more tender side that is seen in his defense of Nettie and the fact that the reader sees a change in him. There are a few scenes that include him staring into his reflection in both dirty water and mirrors. He appears to want to do the right thing and change his life around but that becomes an uncertainty during the final confrontation. When he attempts to persuade Larissa to climb into his van, he seems completely oblivious to the absurdity of what he is saying. “Fine. OK. But at least let me give you a lift. Storm’s coming,” he says. “There’s even a mattress in back if you are tired.” The flirting playfulness each expressed earlier in the story has now left. Coy is colored a pervert, whether he is consciously aware of what he said or not. Sexual predators following young girls seem to invoke some of the most basic of our fears.

Omnipotence of thought comes in to play in this story where the reader thinks he/she knows what Coy really wants of Larissa. The reader hopes that Coy's advances are thwarted and his wishes go unfilled. Larissa never seems to notice the danger. At the moment where he offers to take her home, she rants at Coy angrily, and the words are lost to the reader due to the storm. Larissa now acts in a way contrary to how she has been portrayed earlier and now has metaphorically castrated Coy. The technique of leaving her words "inaudible" I did on purpose, expecting that there would be some negative feedback on it but the workshop class surprisingly left this alone. I want the reader to see that she is angry and see her mouth the words but due to the arrival of the storm, we don't know what was exactly said. The reader doesn't need to be a mind reader to hear Larissa's departing words; she is not going to go along with Coy's plans.

I also make a literary reference by having Coy mentally align himself with Satan in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. There isn't any information lost upon readers who have not read Milton's poem but I believe that it enriches the reading for those who have. Also, it again reinforces the theme of the double. After the success of using present tense in "The Roar of the Vltava", I try it here again. I've read several short stories by Joyce Carol Oates where she has also used the present tense to bring the reader right in to her stories. In fact, she is one of the authors that I most admire in being able to blur the lines between horror and literary fiction.

I went to The Jefferson Hotel on two separate occasions. One the first trip, my traveling companion experienced something growling in her ear while we were in a hallway exploring strange floral scents. I didn't hear it but I believe her because it

frightened her to tears. One the second occasion, I went with more people and we drank and watched horror movies like *13 Ghosts* and *Poltergeist I, II and III*. We captured orbs and silhouettes on several digital cameras as well as experienced cold spot sensations on the floor. Also, the bathroom door opened on my roommate and I only 3 times—once when he was inside alone with the door locked, once when I was taking a shower and the next morning at the exact moment we were talking about it happening. There were several strange and uncanny things that happened throughout my two visits. It was uncanny because on the surface, things had the appearance of not being what we consider normal. What if the telephone rang several times during our stay and no one was on the other side?—involuntary repetition. Any unnatural occurrence called into question our own belief system in the afterlife—our attitudes about death. Some of us arrived either with no expectations or with the fear of possibilities. Would we see a ghost in the mirror or down the hallway?—a double. What if our worst possible scenario was somehow reenacted?—omnipotence of thought. Fear was there with us. What if a glass moved on its own?—magic and sorcery. I could read it in other people’s eyes. Maybe it was mirrored from my own. What if the old fashioned typewriter in the hall started clicking on its own?—animism. Could any of us be physically hurt?—castration complex. While fear tends to manifest itself physically in the body in similar ways, I believe that the mind is essential in what we do with that fear.

At times, my friends appeared really frightened during the experiences but looking back on them now, we can all say that it was a fun time. It was the untold possibilities—the unknown, yet the familiar *what-ifs*. Nobody was hurt or permanently scarred. I feel that each of the stories in this collection have attempted to explore the

theme of the frightening, the uncanny and basic human fear in one form or another. Also, I believe that the stories here are not juvenile imitations of campfire ghost stories either. There is a rich literary tradition of ghost stories, supernatural stories or stories that frighten throughout history. From the occult aspects of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, many authors have done the same. Stephen King won the prestigious Distinguished Contribution to American Letters Award in 2003. By doing so, hopefully King has managed to further blur the differences between highbrow and lowbrow literature. Great literature should stand on its own regardless of genre. While there are many writers who still uphold, as H.P. Lovecraft says, "naively insipid idealism which deprecates the aesthetic motive and calls for a didactic literature to 'uplift' the reader towards a suitable degree of smirking optimism" (11), I will continue to explore the themes and emotions of horror literature.

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PART II
SHORT STORIES

The Last Snowflake

Cheyenne studied the landscape rushing by and imagined it covered in snow, as unlikely as it were to ever happen. It would be beautiful, she decided. Even if it was Texas, hot and humid Texas, the thought of snow helped to take her mind from the topic of sex.

Hot and humid sex.

Above them, the night sky was a theater curtain; heavy and smothering. Stars, like chips of ice, shifted from white to blue to red in the swirling atmosphere. Cheyenne rolled down the window and pressed her face into the hot wind. Furnace-like heat bellowed in from the countryside. Away from the city, the road wound through low trees and over rolling hills. Occasionally, a raccoon would dart across the road, away from the car's probing headlights. Cheyenne closed her eyes, opened her mouth and imagined being caught in a blizzard, trying to catch snowflakes. As a child living near Chicago, she used to catch large snowflakes on her pink tongue.

She missed the cold weather, the wintry precipitation. There was just something about the tradition of dressing up in layers of clothes, gloves and wooly hats and then bounding outside to assault the bitter wind and elements. The chapped lips, flushed faces and numb fingertips were all a part of the childhood experience.

Here, it was all heat and sweat and humidity.

"You'll eat a bug that way," Jericho said. His eyes barely left the road but his right hand traced the curves of her thigh.

In a few months, Jericho would graduate and study astronomy in a college most likely out of state. He wasn't interested in local colleges even though they boasted some

of the best science professors in the nation. In fact, Jericho seemed anxious to get away. *I love him but I'll have to start all over again*, she thought, her stomach queasy with this knowledge.

“Where are we going,” she asked. Being three years younger than he, she was a bit anxious because he had been pressuring her for sex lately. *He's three years older than you*, she thought, as if that were a good enough excuse. She grabbed his hand before it strayed too far.

“The Saucer.” He smiled playfully; cruelly.

In an uncharacteristic moment, she exploded and wasn't able to silence her exasperation. “Jeri, why can't we do anything else? Why don't we catch a movie or go out with friends? Why always the Saucer?”

The Saucer was a clearing in the sultry Texas woods located miles down a lonely dirt road, only minutes off highway 380. Cattle ranchers used these back roads regularly and teenagers liked it for the privacy. The rumor was that a flying saucer landed here years ago but no one seems to know really what happened. There wasn't any mention of UFOs in any of the local papers that Cheyenne knew about. The clearing itself wasn't too large but did sport three crater-like depressions around the rim, as if a craft had landed. It was just an urban legend as far as she knew. But, there were always stories of relatives or friends who claimed to either see it or read about it personally.

“Babe, I hope to get an apartment just as soon as I graduate and we won't need to go out to the Saucer.” She bit her lip against his words. Cheyenne knew that he would never get an apartment if he was to leave for college in a few months. Her mind raced

with thoughts of what their relationship had deteriorated into. There seemed to be too much arguing and negative emotions.

“Is that all there is?” She turned her vacant eyes to the night, searching for an answer among the cold glitter of stars.

Jericho sighed, tearing his eyes away from the road to let them crawl across the tight material stretched across her breasts.

“Of course not,” he said, finally finding her face. Cheyenne softened and a hint of a smile pulled at the corners of her mouth. He grinned. It was just too damned hard to stay angry at him for anything.

“You know how I feel about you, Cheyenne. And besides, this will be one of the last chances to observe some summer constellations.”

“I wish that it could snow here,” she said, rolling the window back up.

Jericho brought Cheyenne to the Saucer when they first started dating. Then, all that was required to have a date was to lie on the hood of the car together, watch the sky and talk about whatever was on their minds. They counted shooting stars and he’d point out planets and man-made satellites to her. However, the last time she came, they both ended up naked on a blanket, slapping at mosquitoes. Eventually, she had to push a little too-eager-Jericho away as well. She wasn’t ready for sex yet. Not here, at least. Jericho had acted hurt, dressed quickly without a word and then waited in the car while she gathered her clothes in the moonlight. Cheyenne cringed at the memory, remembering the rubbed-raw feeling of dirt in her underwear and how she had to pick at burrs in her socks.

Sex wouldn't happen tonight either. Not as long as it was treated as a cheap, emotionless thrill.

"Do you love me?" she asked.

His smile faltered and he checked the road again. No one was coming. The night was silent and hot, holding its breath. He turned back to her and held her hand, his smile bigger than before.

"Sure I do."

The headlights felt out the twisting road before them like a pair of pale hands, guided by impulse. Cheyenne leaned her forehead against the window and watched the landscape blur by in the heated night. Her thoughts whirled constantly like the lull of the tires. What made Jericho change? Or were all boys like him? The trees whirled past the car, reaching out their branches for her, as if they wanted to take her up on their shoulders and present her with the night sky.

She slowly looked at Jericho so as to not draw attention to the fact that she was doing so. He was oblivious anyways. With his head tilted forward, and mouth slightly ajar in a dopey grin, he looked like a caricature. The music on the radio was bland college rock and he drummed his fingers along the steering wheel, keeping rhythm like an oiled machine just getting started. He was sexy though. *I just wish he seemed more interested in me, in us and not my body*, she thought.

When he pulled his hand from her thigh to grab the Coke bottle from the drink carrier, she held her breath. Jericho took a long swig and placed the bottle and his hand back to its former position, giving a slight squeeze.

“Almost there.”

During most of the drive he never looked at her. He never even noticed that she was watching and waiting. Waiting for... what? Cheyenne didn't know. It was as if Jericho took her company and love for granted. She knew that she loved him more than life and couldn't imagine feeling the same about anyone else. On the other hand, Jericho seemed only distant, and cold, as if he had moved among those stars he so studied.

When the voice of dissidence left, Cheyenne was sure that he loved her. Jericho was simply going through a lot of life changes. It's got to be distracting to near graduation, think about the immediate future and deal with all the pressures associated. Surely he wouldn't actually overstep her boundaries because he respected her and loved her too.

I'm just being silly, she thought.

Cheyenne squeezed the hand resting on her thigh and felt it tighten in response. He turned and winked at her.

“Cheyenne, I'm sorry if you didn't want to come out here tonight.” Jericho was silhouetted beautifully against the backdrop of night.

A breeze ruffled her hair and tickled her face. Cheyenne felt good; warm and fuzzy. Her lips were numb from the alcohol but she could still feel the press of Jericho's mouth on her own. Not wanting to admit it, she ached for his touch, his taste.

“Nah. It's beautiful.” Cheyenne swallowed a large gulp of coconut rum and Coke from her plastic cup. Warmth, stronger than the night air, pushed into her belly.

“I just wanted to spend more time alone with you. Especially if I leave in the fall.”

They were alone at The Saucer again. Jericho drained the last of his cup and belched. It seemed to echo across the clearing. He batted at a mosquito and scratched his leg. His shorts ruffled in the breeze. She couldn't remember the stars ever being as vivid. She felt like she could reach up and shake the tunic of night.

“Do you want any more?” Jericho asked. His eyes were dark pools pulling her into him.

“A little, please.”

Jericho walked back to the car parked behind them. Cheyenne finished the remainder in her cup and fingered the soft blanket beneath her. It felt good against her skin. The ground beneath it felt like warm breath. She kicked off her flip-flops and stared into the void beyond the tree tops. Stretching her arms out, she could imagine a large oblong saucer with rapidly rotating lights seeking her out, flashing in from the farthest star and humming low over the humid earth. The Saucer would be the perfect place to meet these extraterrestrial beings. They would come back to a familiar place. Maybe the glowing saucer would pause in this clearing, illuminating her in the purest white light ever witnessed, drowning the background into negative. She wouldn't be afraid. She would laugh into the sky and reach her arms around the pulsating heat, welcoming it into her like sunshine.

She imagined that this would be what love was like. It would be love. Love in the purest form.

The pain interrupted her dreamy thoughts. It was sharp and instant, pushing up between her thighs and into her again and again. Images of the saucer dissipated like wisps of fog into blinding pain and throbbing discomfort. Jericho hung above her, a dark form against the cold gaze of faraway star systems, pushing into her, harder and faster.

“Jericho... what... what are you doing?” she asked, crying out in pain. She tried to get up.

“Shh,” he said, pressing her back down. “I love you. I love you, Cheyenne.”

This isn’t happening! She felt his hands clawing at her bra and then pulling roughly at her breasts. Tears welled up and ran across her cheeks, adding to the humility. He thrust into her harder, heedless of her pleas. The pain was burning spreading into her stomach like a hungry fire.

“No,” she moaned. She flailed helplessly against his chest.

“Shh. I’ve always wanted you. Don’t you know that?”

Her mind went back to her childhood, back to warm wintry memories. There was her mother baking sweet-smelling pecan and cherry pies for dinner. Her father would be seated in the living room, reading his morning paper. Cheyenne was there again, dressing warmly in layers to go out. Her friends, outside already, were waiting for her. A frigid North wind howled around the house, piling snow against the walls like powdered sugar, the air thick with the dance of flakes. She would wrap the scarf around her neck and chase a few snowflakes with her tongue. Maybe even suck on an icicle or two.

“I know you love me...” Jericho was mumbling, licking her face and whispering breathlessly in her ear. “You love me Cheyenne. Why did you come with me again, hmm? You want me too...”

“Not like this.”

She tried to get up again, cutting her hand on a ragged pebble of glass. Broken beer bottles gleamed like slivered pieces of moonlight in the grass. She felt the hot liquid on her palm and in-between her legs. Cheyenne could smell the blood, could already feel the bruises on her breasts. Jericho pumped away, panting like a horse after a morning run. His torso was taut and glistening with the effort.

“I wish that it would snow,” she whispered. “I wish that it would snow if only for one last time.”

Cheyenne squeezed her eyes shut and imagined being the first to see the flying saucer. The brilliance would circle the treetops for her, searching to take her to another world. She was numb. Perhaps they had a place where it snowed all the time and everyone chased the flakes with pink tongues. Maybe they had a time machine that could take her back to her earliest, happiest memories. Her eyes rolled backwards, back in time, into her self, searching for the perfect snowflake. Never having stepped foot into a church, she began to pray. It sounded more like a chant or a wish.

“I wish it would snow. I’ll never ask for anything else...”

“I’m here... I love you...”

Jericho continued to talk to himself, his body tightening with the coming release. He was not the man she had thought that he was. Dimly, she felt it all begin to come undone inside her mind, like the beginnings of an avalanche. It was a sigh or a hiss, and

then a violent movement; crumbling and falling. A house of cards in a gust of wind. A snowman on a warm day.

There was movement; a gathering storm.

Almost there, she thought. The sense of something happening, something irreversible. Then she felt a peculiar click, a sense of change within and out.

The night blew a cold breath across the clearing and her skin dimpled in the breeze. Goosebumps. She squeezed her eyes closed.

There. I can feel it now. No time for layers.

Holding onto Jericho's ass with fingers quickly growing numb, she felt his muscles lock up and shudder. With a couple of quick shakes, he fell against her, whispering into the hollow of her neck. He shivered. Then, she was pulling him closer, deeper inside her; fingers digging in.

"Hey! What?"

The air was like an icicle against her skin, burning cold. Her breath came out in a cloud and drifted around Jericho's own steaming body, swirling back together as one. She searched his surprised face with a hint of sadness; knowing that her dreams were forever gone, forever changed.

Jericho made no attempt to pull his now flaccid penis out or to break free from Cheyenne's death-like grip. Instead, he craned his neck back to see.

The once docile night was now a milky explosion of color and streamers. It appeared as if all the stars had been jarred loose from the sky. Magnificent plumes of white-hot light flared across the shaken night, falling as far as the eye could see. The

forest resonated with fierce shudders and astral impacts. The icy ground beneath them buckled and Jericho began to scream.

The sky was falling; the blizzard finally here.

Cheyenne joined his terrified gaze and smiled when the first snowflake landed on her tongue.

Kheller's Treats

It was the damndest thing he'd ever seen. Who'd in their right minds set up a snow cone stand in October? That's the sort of shit that kids flock to during the summer months. In late October, the legendary West Texas heat is long gone--in fact, snow sometimes falls before Halloween.

It had only been there a week and Randy hated the fucker already. First of all, he couldn't eat snow cones because the cold hurt his teeth. Second, he didn't like the idea of a bunch of people he didn't know milling around his house. The snow cone stand sat across 27th Street in the vacant lot that ran from Osage to the burned remains of Southbridge Baptist Church at the end of the block. Southbridge caught fire last spring during one of the fierce lightning storms that came during the rainy season. Praise Jesus! On most days, he sat outside on the porch with a cold six-pack or a bottle of Jack Daniels; drinking, watching and fantasizing. He let his eyes roam to the stand in the vacant lot. A fiery orange neon sign-Kheller's Treats-towered over the stand, welcoming customers. On the street side, a wooden porch created a small patio with a large service window in the wall. In bright colors next to the window was the flavor board. Over the wooden deck, an overhang propped up by hydraulics shielded the customers from sun and rain.

A black BMW, its engine still purring and ticking, sat driverless across the street from his driveway. Its owner and a small boy were striding up to the order window. Randy watched the man, in his forties, reach into his wallet and withdraw the money. He wore a white collared shirt and creased khakis. The boy jumped up and down and

laughed, pointing at something inside. The man slid the money into the window and a moment later withdrew two large, colorful cones of ice.

Randy took a huge swig of Jack and imagined smashing his baseball bat into the rich man's face. In his mind, he heard the man's cheekbones crack like a home run shot and felt his warm blood pelt his face like rain.

"Probably selling drugs. America's going to hell," Randy muttered. He took another gut-warming swallow of the smoky liquid and watched as the man and the boy climbed back into the car. At the empty church parking lot, they pulled a U-turn and then turned north, disappearing along Osage.

A large, doughy woman in a yellow flower print dress turned the corner and began down the sidewalk. It was Ms. Osterman and her damn poodle. Several times a week, she walked the little rat around the block where it liked to stop and sniff the grass. More than once, Randy had stepped barefoot in fresh shit, cringing as it squished between his toes. One of these days, someone is going to wedge that fucker up your fat balloon ass.

She crinkled her nose up at him as they passed. Randy burped loudly, laughing as the little rat-shit jumped and tried to hide between Ms. Osterman's plump legs. He took another long pull on the bottle, feeling the gentle fuzziness of the liquid lighten his mind. Tammy would be over in an hour or so. She was a Butterface. Everything looked good but-her-face. At thirty nine she appeared older, like a fading rock groupie. But her body was permanently bronzed and still fairly firm. The thought of fondling her small but still firm tits with one hand and grabbing a palmful of ass in the other gave him an instant erection.

He swallowed another mouthful, admiring the feisty burn as it slid down. The lights from Kheller's were already on: Christmas-style festive bulbs lined the trailer and every aspect of the porch and overhang. At night, the twinkle of lights danced across the ceiling and walls of his bedroom. Oddly comforting, they accompanied him into the bathroom on his nightly piss trips.

"Hey there, Randy!" Shelly said. He turned to see the cute teen from down the block walking through the side yard.

"Hey Shelly."

"Mind if I have a seat?" she asked, pulling a folded lawn chair over to him. She plopped down, crossed her legs and lit a cigarette. He made no effort to hide his erection.

"Does your mother know you smoke?" he asked, smiling.

"Fuck her. I don't care." She shook her long chestnut hair out of her face and took a drag on the cigarette. A gentle wind pulled the smoke up and away, through the boughs of an old oak tree.

"I'm not a child anymore."

"You're sixteen," he replied. Randy ran his eyes up her long, crossed legs, past the denim shorts and over the tight, white blouse she wore. The neckline of the blouse plunged and her breasts were like slivers of moonlight. Her face, pimpled by light acne, studied his unabashed gaze.

"I'm tired of her bullshit, you know? And like, she thinks she can run my life and tell me when and who I can see, you know?"

"Yeah." Randy took another swig of his Jack Daniels. The colorful lights danced in her wind-mussed hair.

“She’s making me crazy. I can’t wait to move out.” Shelly’s lips dropped into a frown, her gaze faraway.

“You can always stay here if you need to, you know?” Randy said, taking another sip from the bottle. “You’re welcome anytime.”

Shelly brought her thoughts back and her eyes fell across the bulging material of Randy’s shorts. She held her breath.

“Thanks,” she managed.

“Sure.” He swirled the bottle around in his hand.

“Gimme some of that!” Shelly said, grabbing the bottle from his hands and taking a long drink. She grimaced and wiped her mouth with the back of one hand. “Niiiiice.”

“The best.”

Randy watched the girl take another large drink, grimace again and then hand the bottle back. It was nearly dark. Shelly stared at the blinking lights across the street.

“Have you been over there yet? To Kheller’s?” She pointed across the street to the stand, her eyes squinting to see it better. There were no streetlights on that side of the road but all the decorative lights made it glow like the inside of a Mexican restaurant.

“When are you going to come over?” he asked, reaching out to brush a strand of her hair from her face. His fingers lingered, playing with the softness he found there.

“Not tonight,” she replied. “My boyfriend’s coming to pick me up.” Shelly looked at Randy. She took a last drag on her cigarette and smashed it out with her sandaled feet on the porch.

“I haven’t gone over there. Have you?” He changed the subject, trying to mask his disappointment.

“Not yet,” she replied. “I hear kids at school talking about how good they are. It sounds crazy but some people have been skipping class to get a Kheller snow cone.” She grabbed a long strand of hair and brushed it with her hands.

The sound of the weed eater became silent. Randy saw Jake turn and raise a hand in a brief acknowledgement before disappearing through the garage door.

“I plan on going soon,” she said.

“Fuck. I hate snow cones,” Randy said, turning his attention to the orange neon sign. *I bet you can see that glow on the north side of town.*

“You should get one tonight before they close. Tell me how good they are.” He took another huge swig, no longer feeling the pleasant burn.

“Yeah. Ok.” She stood up and stretched, grabbing the wooden railing. Bending forward, she gave Randy a nice view of her plump ass hugged in tight denim. A black thong protruded past the waistband of her shorts, violating the whiteness of her lower back. She then lifted her right foot and pulled it higher, stretching the calf and thigh. She did the same with the left leg.

“Man, these arguments with my mother make my muscles so tight and tense.”

“Yeah.” *Cocktease*, he thought. To be that young again, he’d give almost anything.

“Well, I’ll catch ya later.” Shelly turned and bounced down the steps. Crossing the street, she pulled her hair up into a ponytail. Randy imagined grabbing it roughly as he pressed her up against a wall from behind.

“Jesus,” he muttered and laughed, swirling the bottle around. I sure hope Tammy hasn’t forgotten about coming over tonight, he thought, his cock aching for female attention. He rubbed it absently, watching Shelly step up to the trailer’s serving window. It slid open and she stared inside. After a moment, she squealed with delight and clasped her hands together, jumping up and down. Even in the dark, from across the street, he could see her breasts bounce. Shelly reached into the darkness beyond the window and pulled out what looked like a large ball of silver sitting atop a paper funnel. She pressed her mouth against the skin of the silver ball and grunted.

“It’s so fucking good,” she moaned. Randy could imagine her pink tongue darting in and out, taking small, firm licks.

“My God, man,” he muttered and laughed, shaking his head.

Tammy better hurry. Randy stood up, watching traffic pass the girl, the taillights of the vehicles glowing like rekindled embers in the church’s remains.

Outside, the wind picked up momentum racing in from the North and swirling around buildings, making them uneasy with the October night. Leaves chattered, swept high into the night air. The sickly moon peered downward through a greasy film of passing clouds, haunting the ground in pale shades of blue light. To the west, dark clouds crept in from the Rockies. Lightning jumped on the horizon.

Across the street, Mr. Kheller’s Treats was open.

The trailer rocked gently in the wind, creaking like an old fun house. Lights swayed, casting shadows that reached towards the road. In the darkness behind the window, a brief fluttering of movement.

The service window slid open.

Randy sat up in bed, uneasy, the sheen of sweat from sex already cooled on his body. The sheets were still slightly damp and bunched at the foot of the bed. He looked over at Tammy's body, rising and falling with each breath in the moonlight. His eyes traced the gentle contours along her shoulders down past her waist and over the curves of her bare ass. Her form glowed in several colors, changing, from the pulsating lights of Mr. Kheller's stand. She really was beautiful once, he thought.

She snorted in sleep.

What woke him up? His body told him that it wasn't time for a piss break yet. Standing up, he scratched the stubble on his face and yawned. Since he was up, he might as well try to make a go of it. Randy shuffled into the bathroom and stood over the toilet in the darkness, watching the lights taint the wall and shower curtain. He squeezed a couple of drops out and then he heard it.

Music. Faint but unmistakable. The sound of it conjured up images of going to the tri-state fair every year and braving the rides as a child. The smells of the midway. Carnival music. Fucking-calliope-funhouse music.

Randy shook his penis, pulled up his boxers and went to the front door. The wind rushed in immediately, chilling his legs. Outside, the music was much louder. He stepped onto the porch, wondering if anyone else heard it.

The city was asleep, missing even the sounds of distant traffic. Far away, north of town, the lonely bleat of a train passing in the night mingled with the magnetic pull of the calliope music. Randy took a deep breath, noting the smell of hay and funnel cakes (or was it his imagination?), and let it out in a plume of swirling moisture.

He shivered in the cold, holding his arms to his bare ribs, and took a step towards Kheller's Treats. The ground was cool and rough beneath his bare feet. The service window across the street was open, revealing a dim rose-colored glow in the trailer's depths. The music poured from twin loud speakers beneath the overhang. He could almost imagine the dark dance of wooden horses and other carved creatures swirling around and around that noise.

Pausing in the middle of the empty street, Randy surveyed his surroundings. All the houses on his side of the block were dark. Did the light and music not bother anyone else? He brought his gaze from house to house, pausing at the fourth one, the dark window on the end—Shelly's. Was she home? He felt like the whole block was holding its breath. No one peered out from behind shut curtains or from shadows in the front lawns.

The train continued to wail like a hungry baby, warbling in the chilly air.

"Mister Weston. We finally meet."

"How do you know my last name?" he asked. The voice had come from inside the trailer. He crossed the road and climbed the porch steps, feeling a chill snake along his neck.

"I know lots of things," the voice said. He sounded so old. "Besides, isn't that your mailbox over there?"

Randy glanced briefly back across the street at the beat up Weston Family mailbox that his father had put up years ago. He'd forgotten about that old thing.

“What are you doing up at this hour?” he asked, feeling sheepish. In the back of the room, he could see the rosy glow of embers burning low behind a fireplace grate. The warmth emanating from the trailer was stifling.

I didn’t see or smell any chimney smoke.

A tall, skinny man stepped out from a door at the end of the porch and closed it firmly. Kheller appeared to be about eighty with thin white hair. He was dressed in slacks and a red and white striped collared shirt. By the light of the October moon, he was the picture of good health.

“Couldn’t sleep.” He held his hands up in a shrug-like gesture.

Maybe it’s the fucking lights and music, Randy thought.

“My name is Mr. Kheller.”

The man held out his large narrow hand. Randy looked at it a moment and then grabbed it. The palm was hot and the old man’s flesh moved easily under Randy’s grip like the skin of a cooked bird. He suddenly felt his stomach flip-flop, threatening to purge its contents. Doubling over, he pulled his hand free.

“Are you okay, Mr. Weston?” The man asked in his ear. “Perhaps, you’d like a drink? Or better yet, a snow cone!”

Randy swallowed hard, letting the nausea pass, and straightened up. Mr. Kheller was back inside the trailer, behind the window. Grinning.

“How? How did...”

“It doesn’t matter. I’ve got all flavors here, Mr. Weston. All the flavors under the sun! And under the Earth too,” The old man laughed. “I have all the traditional flavors

that children love and I also have some nontraditional flavors. Anything that you could want, I can get for you.”

Randy’s mouth felt dry.

“I believe that you like the hard stuff. Isn’t that right?” Mr. Kheller disappeared into the darkness of his lair and returned a moment later with a large ball of ice sitting on a paper funnel.

“Jim Beam? Wild Turkey? Crown? Jack Daniels?”

“JD,” Randy whispered, leaning against the window ledge. This has got to be a dream.

“Of course!” Mr. Kheller reached above him and pulled down a bottle of Jack Daniels.

“How’s Tammy, Mr. Weston?” Kheller continued, unscrewing the cap from the bottle. “She doesn’t drink much herself, does she? Actually, she doesn’t like your drinking much either. She’s something of a nag but I bet she’s a wildcat in bed, huh?”

Randy could hear the man smile in his words. He was right though. The woman could fuck but she didn’t care for his drinking at all.

“It’s not like you’re married,” Kheller said. He tipped the bottle over the ice and they both watched as the smoky brown liquid covered the ice until it was a thick brown ball. Randy licked his lips at the smell.

“Here. Free of charge, my friend.”

Mr. Kheller handed Randy the snow cone. Randy stared down at it, watching the brown swirl into dark and lighter areas. The liquid appeared to move on its own, swirling

until there were dull red lines throughout the cone. The red streaks pulsed with the calliope music and the colored lights.

This isn't real.

"It's your choice, Mr. Weston. This..." Kheller gestured at everything surrounding them. "...will all change soon. Join in on the fun. Participate in the change."

"Help me."

He winked. A photographer's flash pained the sky and a deep bellow followed.

"Drink up."

Randy brought the whiskey snow cone to his edge of his dry mouth and pressed it to his lips. It was soft, cold and irresistible. Plunging it into his mouth, he was nearly overcome by the thick, cloying smell of sulfur. Randy hesitated and then rich, burning whiskey was deep in his nostrils and sliding down the back of his throat. The coldness of the ice didn't even bother his teeth.

"There are endless flavors down here. Would you believe there's even pussy flavored?" Mr. Kheller laughed. "I've seen you eyeing the neighbor piece—Shelly. I can make one to taste sweet just like her. Not that you would be able to tell the difference without tasting her yourself."

Mr. Kheller's laughter was swallowed by a large thunderclap that rolled across the Great Plains from the west. Randy finished the whiskey cone, ignoring the mind-piercing brain freeze to tip the funnel back to lick the away the last drops.

"This isn't real, Kheller," Randy managed, licking his lips.

"Oh, but it is! This is more than real. And this is just the beginning. There are many more vendors. We will be everywhere. We are everywhere."

Vendors, Randy thought. He felt slightly dizzy, as if he had stepped off the merry-go-round stoned.

“Mr. Weston, believe me. It is better to be on the giving end rather than the receiving end, as they say in prison.” Kheller patiently tapped each finger against the counter.

“What?” Randy’s mind and body felt numb. The approaching storm had finally arrived, pelting his half-naked body with large drops of cold rain. Icy fingers of wind pulled at the material of his boxers. Another bolt of lightning rushed along the clouds, promising violence before morning light.

“You’ll see soon enough. Changes are coming, Mr. Weston,” Kheller said, bringing his face into the storm. “I can feel it on the wind”

White-hot lightning arced across the sky like a welder’s torch. Kheller’s eyes twinkled, his face a mask of diabolical mischief. The lightning surge hit the remains of the Southbridge steeple and exploded into sparks. Randy watched as fire raced downward along already-charred beams to the ground where it disappeared. Behind him, the window slid shut and all the lights went out, except for the orange neon sign. It flickered and buzzed like a bug light, several letters no longer working— hell ‘s eats.

“Randy! Randy, get up! What’s wrong with you? Get up!”

It was Tammy’s angry voice, very obviously pissed. A pillow landed on his head and he rolled over, cracking a crusted eyelid open. Outside, it was barely light.

“Randy, Jesus!” Just what the fuck was she yelling at him for? It wasn’t even her house!

“Are you drunk? Do you know what time it is?” she asked. She stood by the bed, staring down at him.

“It’s early.” He didn’t need Tammy yelling at him like some kind of fucking nag.

“No, it’s nearly dark. I went to work already and you are STILL in bed! When I woke up this morning, you smelled like whiskey. Is it that bad that you have to get up after I’ve fallen asleep and drink? How long did you stay up? Your feet are fucking filthy...”

Randy blocked the rest of her rant out and stood up. He imagined what it would be like to hold a pillow over her face until she stopped talking. Randy would push her into the closet and cram as much of the pillow into her mouth as he could. It would feel great. Hell, before her body got cold, he’d probably have one last go at her too.

No, that’s crazy!

He shook his head. Man, what a hangover! Randy hadn’t had one this bad in years, man. Looking down at his bare feet he saw that they were indeed dirty. A crumpled snow cone funnel lay on the floor beside his pillow.

What the fuck-?

Then he remembered bits of his dream, like a kaleidoscope of stimulation. It hurt his head too much. Randy pressed a hand to his temple and fought a strong wave of nausea.

“I don’t need this now, Tammy. You have your own home. Go to it.”

Tammy stood dumbfounded, her mouth opened in disbelief.

“Go. Get the fuck out.”

Randy winced in anticipation of the front door slam. He waited for her car to start up and pull out of the driveway. He just needed a drink or two and some fresh air to loosen the screws in his head.

The suddenness of the calliope music startled him to alertness. He awoke on the front porch, an empty bottle of whiskey nearby. Kheller's blazed in the midnight gloom and the shadows bent and stretched in the awful lights like invading creatures.

He didn't seem to have any customers. Yet, the music had just cranked to life, hadn't it? The wind sighed through mostly bare trees, carrying a chill and promise of an early winter. Other than the music, the rest of the block was cemetery quiet.

Randy grabbed the empty bottle and crept down his porch stairs. Dread was a thick, wet cloth around his head. He swallowed dryly, his throat clicking.

Everything sane told him to run back now. But curiosity killed the cat. The fruit had already been eaten. There was Hell to pay. A million clichés chased each other around in his mind.

I feel like I'm going crazy!

Randy crossed the street. He brought the bottle up like a Louisville Slugger, sweating in spite of the chill.

There were several dark shapes hanging from the overhang, trembling slightly. In an ugly instant, he knew what they were.

Babies.

Stuck on hooks like slabs of meat.

The trailer door opened and Mr. Kheller came out, smacking his lips. He wore a cook's apron—Kiss the Chef!—that hung on his gaunt frame.

“Oh, hello!” he said, feigning surprise. “Would you like a bite to eat? They’re better than turkey legs!”

“Y-you...”

“Business is good, my friend.” Mr. Kheller smiled, his mouth suddenly too full of teeth. “Some would say that this business...” he gestured towards his trailer. “...wouldn’t have had a chance in Hell.”

Another cliché.

“I expect another HUGE day tomorrow. Things will start unraveling fast. It’s just a matter of time.” He ran a finger lovingly down the back of the closest hanging baby.

Randy used that moment to sprint home. He didn’t look back when Kheller started to laugh, the sound like a rusty lawnmower. Randy slammed the door shut and locked it, peeping through the viewfinder to ensure that Kheller didn’t follow. The road and both porches were empty.

“I’m going crazy. I really think I am...” he muttered. He grabbed the cordless phone from its stand near the kitchen. In his room, Randy peeked through blinds while dialing 911.

“Hello?” the voice on the other end said.

“Yes. Police? I’d like to report...”

“Police? I’m afraid that you’ve dialed the wrong number. This is Kheller’s Treats,” the voice said pleasantly. “Would you like a snow cone?”

Randy cursed and hung the phone up. He frantically dialed Tammy’s number.

“Kheller’s. Can I help you?”

Randy threw the phone into the hallway and crawled into bed, curling into a fetal position. It was all he could do to keep from cracking completely.

I expect another HUGE day tomorrow.

He awoke from the nightmare when he felt her crawl under his blankets. Then, there was an eager mouth sucking his penis to life.

Tammy.

He moaned, his dick stiffening instantly. He grabbed her covered head, guiding her gently while she bobbed and sucked. Her hands were cool against his flesh; one stroking his cock and the other teasing his lower abdomen, tickling and scratching in playful tandem.

She took him deep inside her throat, making slick noises with her mouth. When she left, she’d seemed pissed. But now she seemed apologetic and intent only on bringing him to orgasm.

“Hold up,” he said. He wanted to ride her hard before coming. Randy pulled the blanket down.

Shelly smiled up at him, naked. Her breasts jiggled playfully, tauntingly just within reach.

“I let myself in. I hope that you don’t mind,” she said. Her hair hung over her face but it didn’t hide the marks there.

“Jesus, Shelly!” Randy sat up and brushed the hair from her face. “What happened?” She had two black eyes and her lips were swollen, split and bloodied. His dick was swathed in mouth blood.

“Did your boyfriend do this?”

“He won’t anymore. He’s history. Not like you and me, Randy.”

Tammy straddled his body and began to stroke his cock to attention again. A thin line of red drool leaked from the corner of her mouth and fell across his belly. There was the faint but pleasant smell of a campfire.

“Is something burning?”

“Several of the houses behind the alley are on fire. You should see it! People are dancing and playing around it. Some were crying and praying. Some were even naked.”

“Anyone hurt? Why didn’t I hear sirens?”

She laughed coldly and pushed him back against the mattress.

“Fuck me.”

Lubricated with her blood, she guided his dick to the swollen lips of her cunt and eased herself onto it. Rolling her eyes, she arched her back and Randy thrust fully into her.

She gasped and raked her nails along his sides, drawing blood. Randy could feel the walls of her pussy contracting and caressing his throbbing cock. She writhed up and down on his shaft, moaning like a beast.

In the recesses of his mind, he was dimly aware that what he was doing was wrong. Hell, everything that he had witnessed lately had been wrong. No one opened

snow cone stands in October. Especially with snow cones that pulsed and changed colors.

But he felt good now. Real good.

He became aware that his arms were moving and Shelly was crying out. Whether from pleasure or pain, Randy wasn't sure. His fists were finding targets: her soft belly, her breasts, her face, her nose and eyes. She groaned, both eyes oozing blood, her nose a mess of flesh, blood spittle falling like rain.

Her fucking never faltered. Randy realized with sick fascination that Shelly was coming. Her body shook in spasms, her mouth a dark well, her hair whipping like tree branches. Slumping forward, she kissed his chest.

And bit a chunk of flesh from just above his collarbone.

Randy screamed and violently pushed her onto the floor. She slumped against the wall, chewing the piece of flesh. Blood was smeared across her whole upper torso and ran down between her legs.

“Fucking bitch!”

He leapt up and put a hand over the wound. It didn't appear to be serious but it hurt like hell. Shelly didn't move or say anything. She simply smiled.

“You're fucking crazy!” He had to get out of here. Maybe he could stay at Tammy's place for awhile, try and figure things out.

“It's a crazy world, man.” She rubbed her tits, tweaking the nipples to hardness.

“It's a new world.”

“Just what was in that snow cone, Shelly? What the fuck happened to you?” He quickly pulled on his pants.

“Randy, you should know. You’ve had one too.”

“Madness.”

“Exactly.” Her teeth were crimson, predatory.

“You are fucking crazy. None of this is real. I’m getting the fuck out of here.”

Randy went to his closet for a shirt. He opened the door and froze when he saw Tammy’s nude, pale body among the piles of shoes and fallen clothes on the floor. Her mouth was frozen in a last gasp for air.

Shelly’s laughter sent him running. Outside, he paused naked and open-mouthed.

Kheller’s Treats was busy. Customers lined up by the hundreds in the vacant lot. Forgotten cars, some left idling, choked both 27th Street and Osage as far as he could see. People milled about, some fighting, many naked and bloody. The dead were strewn about the ground like corn stalks. People were still arriving by foot to stand in line. They sniffed the air, wide-eyed, like animals scenting prey.

The sun was hidden behind a heavy layer of smoke and Randy could see several houses and businesses burning in the distance. Jake the neighbor, dressed in overalls and goggles stood rigidly using his weed eater on the corpse of Ms. Osterman. Her blood dotted the side of his house like an abstract painting. Her poodle was trying to pull the ear off one of the dead.

Kheller waved at Randy from his service window, his head dipping in a barely perceptible nod.

It wasn’t even Halloween yet. Acrid, sooty smoke choked the air, becoming thicker as more buildings caught on fire. Randy blubbered, feeling his bloodlust grow, as fine ash began to fall around him like an October snow.

The Last Flood

I first saw the puddle last week on my walk home from school.

The fall rains had just started and Charles and I came upon the puddle in the field behind our house. On most days, we would walk to and from school. On the way home, we usually took our time, exploring the different paths and routes through the woods and fields between home and school. I love to walk home, especially in the rain. However, that day my mind was on the pretty girl that sits in the corner of my class. Preoccupied, I nearly stepped right into it after topping a small rise and heading down the other side. Charles yelled and grabbed me by the back of my coat.

“Don’t,” he whispered. “It smells bad.”

Charles was the baby of the family and two years younger than I am. But I stopped dead in my tracks at his voice and the unease on his face. The puddle was fairly small but still wide enough to park two VW Bugs side by side in it.

“It’s just water,” I said. There didn’t seem to be any particular odor but the water looked thick.

“Let’s go around,” Charles said, turning and leading the way. I made my way behind him, carefully avoiding the patches of cement-like mud and wet strands of swamp grass. The rain fell with an angry hiss, stinging my hands and face.

“Wait,” I said. I wanted to see how many skips I could manage across such a great puddle. Charles protested but I bent over until I found a stone with a sufficiently smooth surface that would do. I wiped the rain from my eyes and chucked the rock far into the puddle. It skipped at first but on the third bounce it seemed to lose all

momentum and fell into the water. It didn't seem to fall so much as if it were plucked by an invisible hand from the air.

"Let's go home," Charles whined. He was afraid but I wasn't through yet. I picked up another rock, a smaller one, and threw it hard across the surface of the water. On the third bounce, it disappeared with barely a ripple. Again, I tried and witnessed the same results. Charles continued without me and disappeared over the rise of a small hill. I knew that he would wait for me though. Eventually, I tired of my game and went to find Charles. It would be dark soon and we were soaked. That was a Friday. I didn't think about the puddle until we encountered it again on our way home the following Monday.

Of course, it was bigger. The skies had drained all weekend so it didn't surprise me too much. Charles just stared at the water, his eyes wide. The surface of the water was dark and oily, rippling with the constant barrage of rain.

"I wonder how deep it is, Charles."

He said nothing, unable to take his eyes from the puddle.

I walked up to the edge and tried to see down into its muddy depths. I wondered if it was knee-deep or if there were any fish in it. I thought that perhaps there might even be treasure or money at the bottom. I wanted to suddenly dive into the puddle and plunge my arms deep into the mud on the bottom.

Charles began to sob and I stepped back from the water, momentarily dizzy. The heavy downpour couldn't mask the redness of his eyes. There's no telling how long I

had stood on the bank of the puddle, dreaming about filling my nose and mouth with rich mud. I wonder why then he didn't just run home.

"Hey. It's okay, Charles. Look." I placed my sodden arm around his shoulder and pulled his face close to mine. "I'm fine. See?"

Charles looked back at me, blinking away tears and rain but I couldn't tell what was going on beneath his dark eyes. They seemed to swirl like the water in the puddle. A large rumble of thunder shook the sky, causing us to both jump and tremble. Again, the afternoon had grown dark with the fast approach of night.

We ran home together under the fading light without speaking a word. Mother was too exhausted to question us about our late arrival. She had gone to bed early with another of her migraines and left dinner cold on the stove. Charles went to his room and I ate alone in the dark, staring out the glass kitchen door and into the rain and darkness. Somewhere in the night, past our yard and back fence, a puddle was sucking moisture from the sky, growing fatter by the raindrop.

I waited for Charles after school Tuesday for over a half hour in the rain. He had never been late before. Usually, we met out in front of the school, near the flag pole. When he didn't show up, I went back inside to his classroom. Ms. Fellini was still at her desk shuffling papers and seemed concerned when I asked her about Charles.

"My goodness. He wasn't out there?" she asked.

"I probably just missed him."

"He left class at the same time as all the other students."

“I’m sure that everything’s ok, Ms. Fellini. I’ll just double check and wait a little longer before going home.”

“He did seem anxious to leave class today...”

“I’m sure...”

“Are you sure that you don’t want me to phone the police or your mother?”

“Oh, no ma’am!” That was going to the extremes. I wasn’t going to go there yet. “I’m sure that everything’s fine.”

I smiled and then ran out of the classroom. My heart was beating fast. Why did Charles leave without me? Then, I thought about the puddle and my stomach plummeted.

I ran all the way home after checking the flag pole area again. I only slowed when I came to the puddle in the clearing. It had definitely grown in size. I bent over, catching my breath, and scanned the area for Charles. I didn’t see him anywhere. The rain that had drizzled like silk all day long was now in full force again. My face was cold and wet and I could see my breath on the air. There would probably be an early winter.

“Charles,” I cried out, still bent over, heaving for air. I wanted to check just in case he was still in the area. The drone of crickets and dragonflies fell audibly and I heard a drip sound as if something had been tossed into the puddle.

Or jumped.

It scared me to think that I wasn’t alone. *It’s probably a frog*, I tried to rationalize but I wasn’t buying it. The sound seemed too heavy, too intentional or responsive.

I’m not going to look into the puddle this time.

I skirted the puddle, giving it a wide berth even though it seemed to be eating up half the county already. On the far side, I began to run again through the stinging rain. On the ground, it felt more like I was moving in slow motion. In a dream, most assuredly the rain and puddle would have worked together to pull me backwards, clawing and scratching at weeds.

Charles was home. I thought about whooping his ass but I didn't want to have the favor returned when mother came home. When I opened his bedroom door, he rolled over on his bed, away from me.

"Why didn't you wait for me," I asked, not entering. His room was shuttered and cloaked in near darkness.

"Get out," he said.

I inhaled the deep, leafy scent of the swamp and noticed the wet shoes and pants. Charles was soaked and bits of dead grass and leaves stuck to his clothes. His blanket and sheets looked much the same. Mother was going to be pissed if she knew. I turned and closed his door, leaving Charles to his thoughts and went to watch afternoon cartoons.

After school the next day, it only took fifteen minutes before I went looking for Charles. Again, I went straight to his teacher and she looked astonished. She stood up suddenly, alarmed.

"My goodness! Charles isn't at home? He didn't come to class today."

I ran out before she could manage to say anything else and headed straight for the puddle. We had walked to class together, taking the usual faster route along the road. He'd waved and smiled before I turned towards my own class.

Pumping my arms, I flew like the wind; the rain ran off my face as if it were a windshield. I could smell the puddle long before I could actually see it. It smelled of mold and decay. Topping the last small rise, I saw it spread out before me. The rain dimpled the surface like a flat golf ball. Charles' school supplies were tossed into the weeds, sodden and virtually useless in the deluge. The storm pushed the tall grasses around me like grasping fingers.

Charles stood in the puddle, the dirty water lapping against his lower thighs. He held his hands out, trailing his fingers in the water back and forth. He looked content, smiling up into the storm above. Dragonflies flitted about his head like a halo.

"Charles!" I yelled. My mouth became instantly flooded with rain. I spat, tasting the swampy puddle on my tongue.

He seemed to laugh, the dragonflies dancing on his sound waves. I held my hand up to my eyes to shield some of the water away. Charles continued to stare into the sky and swirl his fingers in the water as if stroking a pet.

"Come here, Charles. Please."

"Do you know what this is?" He finally brought his eyes to focus on mine. He didn't blink against the hard, cold rain.

"It's a stupid rain puddle, Charles. Come here."

"It's much more," he whispered. I could barely hear him in the downpour.

"What?" I asked, moving closer to the edge of the puddle. The water looked like syrup and I didn't want to touch it. It was all I could do to keep from gagging against the smell.

"I'm going through," he said matter-of-factly. "Tell mother that I love her."

And before I could react, he went face down into the puddle. The dark waters swallowed him completely and without a trace.

I couldn't believe it. He didn't come back up after the plunge and I knew that he was gone. Dead, drowned, passed on- whatever. It was too much to process right then in the rain. I wanted to run into the puddle and pull him out. I wanted to take his place. I wanted to cry. As his big brother, I should have been able to watch him better.

And the more that I stared at the spot of his disappearance; the more I wanted to join him. Whether it was in death or some black secret, I wanted to be with my brother. I wanted the brackish taste of the puddle deep in my throat. I wanted to feel the bottom silt on me, in me.

Instead, I sat on the soggy banks of the puddle and cried. The clouds wept with me. Together, we added to the power of the dark puddle. I know why I didn't run into the puddle to search for my brother. I was frightened. Who wouldn't be? Perhaps my father, if I had one that is, would have been able to thrash through the waters and pull my brother out still alive and gasping. He would hold us both close to his dripping face, his strong arms around us both, and never let anything bad happen to us.

Sometimes at night, I fantasize about my father coming back to us, to take care of us. He is whatever I need at that moment, whenever I stare up into the darkness above my bed. My father, in a way, has always been my imaginary guardian angel.

But he wasn't there for me when Charles went under. I cried, blaming myself for not being strong enough to be there for him when he needed me. I knew that it wasn't really my fault. But what can you tell yourself at that precise moment when something unspeakable happens?

It was completely dark when I went home. I don't know why I didn't run home right away. Or why I didn't go to a neighbor's house or even call the police. I didn't think that anyone would believe me. Mother had gone to bed early again. I skipped dinner and climbed the stairway to my room. Once there, I peeled off my wet clothes and tossed them into a corner. Shivering, I climbed into bed and listened to the sky fall upon the roof and shake the foundations.

Midway through dinner the next night, Mother asked me about Charles. I paused with my fork, laden with macaroni and cheese, halfway to my mouth. She asked casually but as I continued to hesitate and avoid eye contact, she grew restless.

“Well? Where's your brother tonight?”

I began to cry great big shameful tears. I could not think correctly. How could I tell her what happened? She would leave just as my father did.

“He's in the puddle,” I sobbed. Dropping my fork, I used both hands to brush away my tears. Mother stood up violently, knocking over her wine glass.

“What do you mean ‘he's in the puddle’?” She was getting angry. “You are his older brother. You're supposed to look out for him!”

She circled the table and swatted at me. I'm not sure if she wanted to hit me or grab me but I moved all the same. I just escaped the callused tips of her fingers, and knocked aside my chair. Rushing to the back door, I threw it open and paused a moment. The rain was falling in Biblical proportions, heavy and unyielding. I could see that mother was furious but she was scared and shaking also.

“Come. I'll show you.” My words could barely be heard about the angry din.

Turning, I disappeared into the black rain. My feet knew the way by heart and the failing light wasn't a factor. The endless rain soaked me in seconds and I fought against the cold to keep my teeth from chattering. She stayed behind me, panting and crying out Charles' name. Porch lights and street lamps disappeared from view and the expanse of the night sky enveloped us. Running across the open field, I noticed that the darkness wasn't complete. The clouds rolled above in dim silver light. In minutes, we were upon the bloated confines of the puddle. It was an oil slick in the darkness; the grass and weeds around the outer edges yellow and dying.

"Charles!" She found his discarded school supplies and rushed towards them. Picking up his soaked backpack, she glanced about wildly. The mud on her face and clothes made her look like a monster in the near-darkness.

"What did you do with him?"

"Mom. I didn't do anything. He went in there." I pointed to where I had seen him standing. She rushed into the puddle, dropping the backpack and moving forward with long strides, her wet hair limp and hanging in her eyes.

"I told him to come out, mother. I really did." I couldn't stop the tears.

"Charles!" She felt around in the water with both hands, stepping carefully in the hidden mud. The water climbed to her waist like slow molasses.

"Please, mom. Come out. I don't like you in there."

She ignored my pleas, however, and continued to thrash about in the water. I saw her pull up a long stick and then use it to poke around in the water around her. I circled the edges, afraid of getting too close to the water.

"Let's call the police. Please," I whined. "Please, just come out. I'm sorry."

She stepped further away from the edge of the puddle and plunged her stick into the depths. It went under easily, too easily, and she nearly fell over. Gasping, she stood up and looked at me.

“There’s an edge here. I can feel it with my foot.”

I picked up a large dead branch and rushed back to the puddle’s edge with it, hoping to hold it out to her. It was heavy but lighter on the end that I held over the puddle’s black waters.

“I’m just going to bend a little and see how deep it is.”

“Mother, no! Please come back.” I held the stick out to her until it was within her grasp. Still, she crouched into the waters until it lapped hungrily against her chin. I knew that she was pushing her free leg deep into the water to see if Charles was there.

Mother straightened up and grabbed the edge of the branch I held out to her. She stared down into the waters.

“It’s cold down there,” she said. She turned to stare accusingly at me. The rain and my tears blurred her silhouette. “My God! It’s so *cold*...”

The branch snapped in her hand and she went down into the water as if her legs had been pulled out from under her. The waters closed over her head with a lip-smacking sound and then became still except for the rainfall.

I waited for nearly an hour, listening to the steady pulse of the rain.

Charles came to me last night.

I stayed home from school and watched television most of the day. The newscasters shook their heads in disbelief at the weather, calling this the worst flooding

in recorded history. Many streets were covered and already impassible. They suggested for everyone to stay indoors unless they had to get out into the storm.

“There’s just no foreseeable end in sight,” the weatherman said. “Don’t call emergency personnel unless it is absolutely necessary and keep it tuned here for future bulletins.”

I knew that my mother and brother were gone because of me. It was my fault. Charles and I should have taken a different route home from school. I should never have shown any interest in the puddle, let alone tossed stones into it. I might have awakened something bad. Calling the police would have been useless. If they could have made it through the rain-swollen streets, would they believe me? What if I took them to see the puddle for themselves?

If only things were different, they would both be here with me right now.

I ate the rest of the cold dinner from the night before and then began to wash the dishes. As I was placing the last dripping plate into the dish strainer, I heard a thump against glass. Drying my hands on a dishtowel, I stopped at the back door and saw my brother staring back through the glass.

“Charles?” I asked, dropping the towel.

“Please, let me in.” He said.

He didn’t look well. In fact, he looked dead. His skin was bluish and pale, the veins in his neck like dark tree roots. Entangled with swamp weeds, his hair thrashed in the tempest. Nose against the glass, he failed to fog it with his breath. He stared at me with bloated eyes nearly drained of the rich, brown that once colored his pupils.

“Please.”

I opened the door for him and stood back, letting the wind howl into the kitchen. He was still my brother.

Charles came in slowly, his bare feet leaving wet prints on the linoleum. He still wore the same shirt and pants that he did the day he went under. They smelled bad, as if he had rolled in something dead and gassy. Closing the door against the elements, I watched him draw his arms up to his sides and shiver.

I took Charles into my room and helped him undress, laying his wet clothes in a pile on the floor. He was skinnier than I remembered. I helped Charles into my bed and lay down next to his cold flesh, drawing the blanket up to our chins. He didn't talk for a long time and I was content to simply listen to the sounds of the storm raging outside. I heard him crying and was startled to see him smiling at me.

"What is it, Charles?"

"It's the place," he sobbed, his smile never faltering. "It's beautiful over there. I want you to come with me."

"I'm scared." The rain sounded like fists hammering on the roof.

"You don't want to be here when the...others...come. They will come through to this side soon, brother." The smile slipped away from his cheeks and he was solemn.

"They don't bother us on the other side but it is different there. It is *perfect*."

Charles took my hand in his cold one. We listened to the sound and the fury of the hopeless storm around us.

When I awoke to another gray day, Charles was gone. The bed was damp from where he had lain and his clothes were gone. I knew that this would be the last time to

ever see my brother. I got out of bed and began to dress for the day. Mother would have been proud.

We had talked late into the night. He came back to offer me a second chance to join him on the other side of the puddle. I asked him if there was any pain.

“A little,” he responded. “Only at first.”

I asked him about mother and he smiled brightly.

“She’s happier than I have ever seen her. She isn’t mad at you, you know.”

Charles was vague when I asked about the others, the creatures from the other side. He seemed to hold back something whenever I asked about them, never directly describing them.

“We don’t bother each other.” But I saw fear flicker in his eyes.

I turned on the television as I dressed. The top news story was the rain and flooding. The county was under a full-fledge flood and flash-flood warning. The clouds were continuing to balloon up over a stationary weather front meaning more rain and more intense flooding for at least the next several days.

“Please, stay indoors...” the man was saying on the screen.

I pulled on my rain boots and grabbed a rain slicker from my closet. Tying the hood firmly down over my ears and hair, I went downstairs and out into the waiting weather.

It was chaotic. The sky was chrome and water crashed in icy sheets. I rummaged along the edge of the house, stopping now and then to pick up items and stuff them into the pockets of my rain slicker. The backyard was a river, knee-deep in some areas.

Picking up more smooth shapes from the water, I began to whistle the tune to SpongeBob Squarepants.

All around me, water rushed along the ground, flowing, gushing—always hurrying. In the lower lying areas, it couldn't move as fast and began to pool, collecting debris. I waded through these areas, knowing just the same where it would all end up.

“Who lives in a pineapple under the sea?” I sang to a bird-less sky.

The puddle was enormous now, swollen from the constant barrage from the heavens. The grasses out ahead of the growing body of water were yellow and dying. The trees caught by the water were leafless and seemed covered in a rust-colored mold. I climbed up a neighbor's wooden fence and sat down there, letting my feet dangle over water the color of soy sauce.

I pulled the rocks from my rain slicker and laid them along the fence beside me. These would work just fine. Taking one in my right hand, I let my fingers run across the smooth, flat surfaces. I could almost imagine it dry again and buried in dirt. With a deft movement, I flung the rock out over the puddle.

It skipped once across the oily surface, twice, and then dropped into the depths. I had told Charles that I was scared and indeed I was. As I prepared my fourth rock, the surface of the puddle seemed to shimmer in the torrential downpour.

In the autumnal storm light, I saw a large mottled black shape, darker in places than the pond, rise up underneath the surface. It created a ripple that raced towards me as the shape beneath seemed to uncoil. I tossed the remainder of the rocks as hard as I could towards the shape and leapt backwards from the fence.

From a small rise in the distance, I watched the puddle grow calm again, the surface silent and eerie. Bowed by the weight of the sky, I thought I could feel my father's presence standing behind me, sad and helpless.

The clouds continued to toss down rain heavy like toads, drops thick like ripe fruit.

The Roar of the Vltava

Before it happens, before the screams and the bitter cold, Cora still will not sit beside me on the bus. Even though I save her a seat next to the window, I know she won't come. I watch her stop four rows up next to Josh, who of course is better looking than I. She surveys the seats behind her, pausing briefly to make eye contact and toss her hair in that completely unconscious way of flirting. Smiling, she scoots in next to her man.

Hey, what happens in Europe stays in Europe.

The rest of our student group quickly climbs the steps to the top level of the enclosed double-decker tour bus, filling the aisle and empty seats. We are one week into a two week university-sponsored travel abroad trip to the Czech Republic and it has been a long day. First, we traveled for over four hours from Brno to Rozmberk castle in South Bohemia, near the Austrian border. After a tour and lunch, we then traveled to Cesky Krumlov for a walking tour and dinner. It was all beautiful and breathtaking but after an exhausting day in the mid-March cold, all eighty two of our group is feeling exhausted.

I hear a sweet, high laugh and turn my attention to the source. Cora has her head thrown back against the seat, eyes closed slightly with her mouth open in laughter. Feeling pleasantly buzzed from several beers with dinner, I wonder not for the first time what it would be like to kiss that mouth. The dryness in my own mouth makes me pull a water bottle from my backpack on the floor before me and take a long swallow. The seat next to me remains empty. It is strange considering that the bus ride down here was packed. Cora laughs again and I turn my attention outside, resting my forehead against

the cool pane of glass. The bus rumbles and shakes, slowly pulling itself to life, and I watch the sun's dying rays fall across the frosty landscape as we enter the freeway.

Initially, the mood on the bus is buoyant and cheerful. The excitement continues to flush our cheeks where the outside cold left off. The adults on the trip stay downstairs on the bottom level where it is less noisy and the bus doesn't sway as much. Most of the students are under twenty-one and are getting to experience drinking on their own in a foreign country. I am twenty-seven, an older college student on my first trip to a different country. The difference in age between most of us doesn't stop me from drinking my share of *cerne pivo*, excellent dark beer. We are all like children experiencing true awe.

Nighttime in the Czech Republic has a way of creeping up on you and then suddenly dropping the landscape into shadowed mystery. Through the thin treetops, I watch plump black birds scramble for cover. The fading canvas of the sky is crisscrossed and sliced by power lines; angles in constant motion. Ten feet below us, the bus tires thrum on cracked asphalt, creating soothing lullabies. This is the land of gypsies and myth. There is superstition beneath the guarded glances and muttered words of the Czech people. We encounter politeness and courtesy wherever we go but it is sifted through a thin veil of distrust. We are outsiders. But I have always felt like one. It didn't take Cora or the Czech Republic to make it clear.

She begins to laugh again and at this point I wish that she'd either start making out with Josh or that she'd choke on her own tongue. Either would suffice although the thought of her choking sends a minute shiver or pleasure up the base of my neck.

I don't want to believe that Cora is a bitch. But she is insensitive and speaks before thinking things out, I believe. We've barely said hello to each other during this trip. Aside from attending the same college where I occasionally see her in the hallways and on campus, she went to my old high school in West Texas. She's the type of girl who always seems to have a hand in everything. I envy that kind of life.

I never was popular in school. We always moved around and so after awhile, I learned to stop trying to make friends. They never lasted long because my mom would pull me to another school, another city, another state. Eventually, I found a little stability in high school and was able to make a few friends and last out the four years until graduation.

But back to Cora, I was just trying to start a friendly conversation. There was no need for her to respond the way she did, whether it was intentional or not, before dinner. Humiliation is a hard pill to swallow even with enough beer to help it down.

The bus buzzes with a disjointed chorus of the day's events; the sound is like a constant waterfall of voices. Laughter breaks out from the middle of the bus.

"Everyone knows what a Dirty Sanchez and Hot Carl is," Javier says over the laughter. He is seated several seats in front of us. "Don't you have anything new?"

"Do you know what a Seawhore is?" someone asks.

"What?" Javier responds.

"A chick who is so loose, you can stick your ear up to her cooch and hear the ocean."

There is another eruption of laughter and few “eww”s tossed into the fracas. Even Cora seems amused by the conversation. The bus lurches over a pothole and we sway while the wheels find pavement again.

“Anyone know any more new terms?” Javier asks, surveying us with his dark eyes.

“Fresh bread,” I say. Heads swivel to hear the rest. “After you let a Silent-But-Deadly fart, you ask everyone, ‘Do you smell fresh bread?’ and they will inhale deeply until their eyes water.”

More laughter. Even though I feel like an outsider, I often try to fit in. Maybe sometimes I just don’t put in enough effort.

“No way. That’s fucking gross, dude.”

“Preggo pause.” Another guy speaks up above the din. “It’s that awkward moment when the girl you’re banging realizes you’ve come inside of her.”

There is a moment of silence, then more delirious laughter. The conversation about obscure new terms continues but I turn my attention back to the cool glass and the rush of scenery outside. Another gale of laughter and I chuckle silently without having heard the punch line. I think about Cora sitting beside me, her warm hand on my arm and the tropical scents from her hair here in a place so far from the tropics.

For a moment, I let my imagination run vivid with possibilities and I fall into a thin sleep. In that space of time, I hear the poetry of the road through the vibrations, the indistinguishable voices and noises, and I dream about bunny rabbits and chocolate. It’s an Easter dream and our tour group is hunting chocolate Easter eggs up in the mountains and along the icy riverbank. I stare into the black shallows of the Vltava River and

imagine I can see colors swirling with the current. The face reflecting back at me looks strangely detached and fearful. Headless rabbits start falling from the sky, striking through the thin trees like hail and their toothy, smiling heads roll obscenely after us from the hills. I wake up when the bus jostles over another pothole.

The mind-fog burns away slowly and I remember where I am and the day's events. The overhead lights have been extinguished and it is mostly dark in the vehicle. There are the gentle sounds of sleep and the buzz of the bus heater. Dark heads tossed backwards against the seat; mouths open to the Czech shadows. Everyone around me appears to have crashed, their sugar and alcohol-fueled energy already spent.

I push my forehead against the glass. Snow is falling again. Huge, thick flakes rushing past the bus as we careen down the freeway. When a motorist passes in the opposite direction, the world is temporarily lit up in shades of white before us, the snow a small blanket of chilly cloth covering the ground. I think about the Lady in White; the ghost of Rozmberk castle. Local myth holds that she roams the halls and watches over the castle, the color of her dress significant of events to come. White is good news; black is the worst. Apparently, she was last seen before WWII, her dress color protesting the Nazi flag hanging on the walls.

We invaded her halls this afternoon and gazed up at her large painting. She seemed to follow us with her darkly expressive eyes, urgent to usher a message perhaps but frightened by the noise and stomp of over eighty pairs of feet. With her presence, like a cold wind on the back of our necks, we shuffled from room to room, looking at the artifacts, the art, the history.

The tour brought us out into the snowy courtyard and we crossed a bridge. From this hillside, the town lay quaint and quiet among the riverbanks below. I walked behind Cora, carefully watching my step on the black ice teasing the staircase and the steep incline down the hillside. Cora and another girl, Tera, were laughing about something. I walked closely behind but carefully held on to the railing to keep from skating into the two girls. Josh jogged down loudly behind me, slipping through the heavy snow on the sides of the walk path and bumped into me, sending me sliding on a patch of black ice. Before I could land heavily on my ass and take out a few of the tour group, a hand grabbed my backpack and pulled me upright again. Laughter floated down from the path above.

“Sorry about that, man.” Josh grinned. I muttered thanks and watched as he slipped in between the two girls, an arm around each back.

Again, the bus sways and slips on the freeway, moving into the second empty lane before straightening out again. The bus driver is a local and I wonder why he still drives so fast when the conditions appear this bad. Outside, night has frozen into obsidian and the snow swirls heavily, pattering against the window with tiny icy bodies.

It is a white-out. From where I sit, the sky is simply dropping all its precipitation as fast as it can. We pass dark forests full of thin trees that barely impede the invasion of snow. Then we pass great patches of white that gleam dully in the moonless night. These are treeless areas that gather all the snow like a welcome mat and reflect what little light there is. It is deadly and beautiful at the same time.

I'm not worried about the bus sliding on the freeway. Instead, I wonder if I'll be able to fall back into peaceful slumber. Sleep is the cover my alcohol-indulged mind needs. I drank too much at dinner.

Located in the foothills of the Czech Republic, near the Austrian border, Cesky Krumlov is an unbelievable site; a medieval town virtually untouched by the years. We drove through scenery straight from a Nosferatu film. Narrow cobblestone streets pulled us under the ancient arches holding up the castle bridge and into the heart of the city. We crossed an angry river and roamed down darkening alleyways, peering into windows of quaint Bohemian shops.

Dinner took place in a tavern that has been in operation since the early 1400s. We ate a hearty meal of roast chicken or pork medallions with baked potatoes and cabbage in a dimly lit room made of brick. The ceiling was low and made of brick too; the sconce lights mimicking small torches. Our servers wore traditional medieval garb and brought us mug after mug of that delicious dark ale. Even though the overall mood of our tour group was incredibly happy, I chose to remain quiet and sit in the back of the room, with the brick walls closing in on three sides. The scene with Cora had already passed and though I wasn't exactly embarrassed still, I didn't feel particularly social. Because of my mood, which I'll get back to later, I drank more than I should have.

After dinner, we all had a bit of free time before we were to meet back on the bus. I took this opportunity to wander the unfamiliar streets alone, taking in the sights as much as I could. I knew that I may never see such things again and I still haven't since that night. Instead, I let the increasing alcohol euphoria guide me through Cesky Krumlov

while dusk fell just as dark as the Vltava river. It was beautiful and I had all but forgotten what Cora had said before dinner.

I'm a writer and it had been a while since I'd really written anything worthwhile. Cesky Krumlov was inspiration though. Beautiful. The creative fires inside me roared and my mind welcomed it. I was in the moment, my feet on autopilot and my heart in everything.

Because it was already twilight and late winter, most of the tourist and craft shops were closed. I didn't need them to inspire my curiosity anyways. Instead, I reflected upon the history of the region and the bloody past. I thought about gypsies and Czechs and invaders constantly in motion. The battles, the ring of the blade, the blood-soaked ground. I thought about incredible castles and fortresses dotting the rugged countryside. Everything that I had learned about the region and the country so far was churning around in my head. Meanwhile, my feet took me through narrow streets that I only thought I'd see on television and movies. It was pleasant to finally have this euphoric high.

My eyes must have slipped closed in remembrance. I feel the bus slide gently but unnervingly again and I peel my eyes open. Everyone on this level of the tour bus still appears to be deep in slumber. I envy them for they don't have to worry about the maniacal driving. Again, I turn my attention to the passing landscape, wild and unknown to most of us. More forests with thin trees. Then open patches of land, white even in the truest dark of night. Sometimes these open fields harbor huge electric transformers that stand imposingly against the horizon like a machine in a Japanese anime.

My mind wanders to the people who live out here in the Czech countryside. What stories do they still carry with them when the sun sets and darkness clamps its mouth down on the land? Many of the dwellings visible alongside the narrow roadways and countryside are squat little buildings that seem to dig into the earth. I am surprised by the small sizes of most of the houses, as if they are huddling from the elements and fearful of the night.

The moon, bone-white and nearly full, temporarily surfaces from the black cauldron of clouds and illuminates the hilly landscape in ghostly light. Snow, whipped by the winds, swarm out of the sky, thick as fog. A few small houses within sight of the road are lightless from outside; smoke spewing from their chimneys. I imagine the occupants inside securing warmth and security from the firelight, trying to hold back the shadows. The Lady in White from Rozmberk castle roaming like a banshee among the hills and houses, her dress black as the eyes of a shark. She would float over the snowdrifts, her dress molten movement and the winds steering her like a majestic ship.

Hot on the tail of her dress would come the unnamable; evil best not viewed in daylight. They would erupt from the cover of the forest, bestial and hungry for blood. Beings capable of shifting their inky demonic shapes as they ran, sometimes on two legs and sometimes on four, all teeth and claws and snarls of beasts not heard for centuries or more. These beings would descend the hillsides, loping towards unsuspecting house occupants and anything in their way. Vampires and werewolves and other creatures of myth hide until their rampage passed, leaving only quiet death steaming in the morning air.

The bus brakes suddenly and my head, which had been lolling, raps against the window, waking me up again. There are a few sleep-induced mumbles and coughs from the students around me. Everyone remains still; dead to the world. Cora has her head on Josh's shoulder and together they are lying against the window. I bet he has one hand inside her shirt or at least curled across her stomach. I wonder what she sees in him but then again, I ask myself why do I care?

What would it be like to have the power to control dark creatures of the imagination? What if I could send them specifically after someone, like siccing a dog on a person? I wonder what it would be like to harvest and use such power. This is just a story, just a mind game I use to brainstorm ideas. I think that a lot of writers go over the "what ifs" and weigh the possibilities before putting them down to paper. I would even bet that we write a lot of grotesque things in our heads that never even make it to paper.

I imagine Josh and Cora running through the wilds of the Czech Republic, miles from a road, casting furtive glances over their shoulders. Fear is in the air and their eyes roll wildly like those of a terrified horse, their breath shallow and quick. The ground is bare and firm beneath them. Natural gouges in the land try to trip them up as they sprint towards the shelter of a copse of trees. Under a cloudless moon, shadows sweep down like falling leaves and move along the ground, barely disturbing the snow. They part and swirl together, a constant motion of confusion and death and hunger. Cora screams; the sound thin on the edge of the wind.

There is a sick but pleasurable feeling in these types of fantasies. I'm not denying that. But, Cora and Josh aren't evil and I don't actually wish any physical harm to them. There are times, though, when you are in a mood to be a little masochistic and you wish

you had the opportunity to set up an amusing scenario and watch it unfold. There are those times when you wish you could have influence over their thoughts and emotions. There are those times when you wish you could pay them back for their ignorance or idiocy. Again, I wouldn't actually wish harm upon Cora and Josh. I never wanted to hurt anyone on this trip.

The bus passes through a thick forest where the trees push in close to the road and appear to reach for us. Far below the thin tops of the trees, in the depth of the woods, there is movement. I watch, seeing my reflection in the glass float among the thin tree trunks.

I stood behind her when we first piled out of the bus at Cesky Krumlov. We walked into town and went directly ahead with the guided tour of the city and castle, where we learned about the history of the city and region. The same was everywhere we went—usually a guided tour complete with history and a Q and A session afterwards. Before dinner, I walked up to Cora and tried to actively be a part of her little group.

The movement among the trees seems to thicken like swift flowing syrup; a darkness moving among the near-dark. The trees pull back from the road suddenly and there is a temporary sense of falling as wide open land pulls my gaze towards the horizon. Before me, lonely houses shudder against our passing.

She stood with Josh, two other boys and two girls. All I did was walk up and say hello. Cora stopped talking to her friends and faced me.

“Hello,” she said. She looked surprised and amused at the same time. A twitch of a smile played with the corner of her pink lips.

I went to your high school, I told her. Someone snickered. The smile stretched itself into cruel beauty on Cora's face, etching itself into my memory.

From the corner of my eye, I watch the inky shapes spill from the trees and come after us. The bus suddenly lurches and picks up speed. Shadows with bare glimpses of arms and legs and heads. They flow down the hillsides, blocking the snow from the ground with their bodies until the ground seems to mirror the sky.

"You're the guy with one testicle, right?" Laughter. Josh rubbed Cora's back, grinning sheepishly.

"Yeah. I heard about you," she continued.

I'm caught off-guard.

"How?" I heard my mouth say. This was a personal bit of information that I didn't know had got out past a few close friends, let alone to a perfect stranger.

"Everyone back there knows about it," she said. "They say that you nearly lost both of them when one suddenly swelled up to the size of a cantaloupe. Is that true?"

"I know someone who had to get one removed," one of the girls said. "He has a hard time keeping it up. He has to take Viagra."

I should not have been so embarrassed by a medical operation. Yet, I was completely unprepared for her comments. All I did was walk away.

I close my eyes again and imagine the creatures riding over the land like the Crusaders. I imagine the thrill of the hunt. I can see them pulling alongside the tour bus, clamoring over each other to peer up into our level of the vehicle with nothing but darkness where their eyes should be.

The sound of the road changes as we cross a metal bridge. The bus driver brakes hard again and then we are swerving, moving unnaturally. I open my eyes to see the edge of the low bridge rapidly approaching. Beyond it, a wide ribbon of darkness stretching away into the hills and woods.

The snow spins around the window in all directions but the yawning darkness beyond terrifies me. Someone screams. We hit the side of the bridge with a deafening crunch. Downstairs, I hear more startled cries and screams. Glass explodes.

For what seems like an eternity, there is a strange weightless sensation and I'm disoriented. I'm up out of my seat and my backpack is ahead of me. The darkness outside the window appears to be moving; welcoming us into it, rippling in anticipation.

This is where things get hazy.

There is an explosion: an eruption of sound, sensation and one inside my head when it hits the side of the bus hard. When we land in the river, I feel blood run down my face and neck and there is incredible pain. I black out temporarily. Ice cold black water brings me back around and I find that I'm able to move again.

The river is shallow but swift and we land on our side in the water. Debris and clothing rushes past as the water quickly pushes in through the shattered windows and twisted metal. The current is too swift to climb backwards, over the bus seats to the emergency window in the back.

I shiver violently and clutch myself, trying to clear the dull haze of pain in my head. I know that I must get out of this bus. There is chaos around me. Moans, screams, weeping. I pull myself upwards towards the staircase downstairs, which happens to be at the top of the sideways bus.

I climb over a seat and see a large river rock. The river gurgles in, the broken bodies of their occupants stuck between it and the seats. Javier won't tell another sex joke. There is no organization inside here, just flurry of dark movement and sounds. Finally, I make it down to the next level and with the push of the current, quickly get to the front of the bus. Someone has already forced the sliding doors open and I am able to climb up and out.

There are bodies. Confusion. Bitter cold and the smell of death.

I am near frozen and hypothermic. Somehow, I stumble through the knee to thigh-deep water to make it to shore. Several people wade back in to pull me out. Our tour conductor, Dr. Slovik, is one of them. His left arm hangs funny but he seems not to notice. I turn and see the bus swivel in the current. Suitcases and debris line the shore. Cora's friend Tera lies on the rocky shore. More people climb out of the bus. I touch my head and wince.

The snow is falling heavily and there is no warmth except for the blood slowly freezing on my neck. Someone pulls me over to a suitcase open on the ground. Inside, the clothes appear to be mostly dry. Quickly and with unseen help, I peel off my wet shirt and jacket and pull on a dry shirt.

"Something's coming," I hear someone yell.

Looking back over the top of the bus, there is movement on the horizon. Like a wave of black blood, it flows towards the river.

"Everybody run!" I think I yelled it. Most of us weren't capable of doing any running though. We were lucky if we had made it out of the bus.

However, feeling a chill that had nothing to do with being wet or the cold, I scramble up the riverbank, over rocks, but I know that my legs won't carry me much further. Several people follow me, casting backward glances at both the bus wreck and the approaching shadows. I look for shelter, the roar of the river causing my ears to ring.

People rush past me, heading for the deeper shelter of the forest. A few fall down. Someone cries. I scramble over several large fallen logs and notice that one is hollow. Pulling out chunks of wood, cobwebs and old fur-lined nests where animals had bedded down, I then am able to back up inside.

Even my whole head is covered in the log. It is quieter. Through the opening, I can see the snow find the ground, filling in footprints. Over the anger of the river, there are still the sounds of running and then the new sound of pursuit.

The sound is soft, like trees rustling in the breeze. Or a bunch of voices whispering together in a language you cannot understand.

"Help me." This voice is female. She falls to her knees on the rocks in front of my opening and she is soaked and shivering uncontrollably. "I saw you climb in there."

"Cora?" I ask. I can see her nipples through the wet fabric of her shirt. She bends down close to the opening. Her eyes are huge; unbelieving.

"Is there room for me? Please?"

"Cora..."

"I'm sorry. Please?" She tries to climb in with me, her face brushing up against mine. I feel her warm tears on my cheek.

"Maybe there is another hollow tree next to this one..."

“Please?” Her pleas grow more frantic. I try to squeeze further down into the hollowed log.

“I’m not sure...”

And then she is gone. That whispering sound grows to a dull roar and they pull her out and up into the air. There isn’t even a scream. Just the sounds of the river. I lay there with my head down, her tears slowly freezing on my face and wait until morning.

Out of the eighty-two of us that traveled to the Czech Republic, only six survived. As Americans traveling abroad in an Eastern European country, we made the national news. Czech authorities wrote it all off as an accident, with most of us perishing in the river. There was no blood and very few bodies were discovered down river, where most of us “disappeared”, according to Czech police.

But how do you explain the footprints in the snow that simply ended? The ones that we made while running up the riverbank? There were still more tracks across the field and into the forest which never were filled in completely by the snowfall. Police simply didn’t want to see them. They hurried their investigation and took us to the hospital for examination.

I survived by waiting out the night in the hollow of an old tree. Five other people survived by their own methods. We all had similar stories to tell the police, none of which went into their reports.

None of us talk to each other either. Two moved away to other states. I heard that one died in a car crash last spring. As far as I know, the other two survivors are living with whatever stories and guilt they may have.

It's easy to say that none of this was our fault. Or that none of it happened. What is real and what is fictional can be blurred heavily at times. What really happened on that night?

I can't help but to wonder if in some way I am responsible. I know that people can't conjure up diabolic creatures at will. I *know* that. But a part of me wanted this to happen. A part of me willed it to. And even though it was a fantasy, I remember the night's events unfolding just as I've confessed here.

I lie awake some nights, the roar of the Vltava River in my ears, and I wonder if there was anything that I could have done different. I wonder if there was a way that I could've saved Cora.

Thinking of Aurochs and Angels

The relentless September heat crashes through the blue sky to the thirsty landscape, throwing up shimmering waves that twist and distort the background. Dust swirls in the furnace-like heat, creating an empty spiral that dances until it collapses against a copse of trees. Nearby is an asphalt road but the sound of traffic is distant. Greasy black birds fill the trees near the creek with sputtering coughs that sound like laughter. Beneath the wilting branches, the water is stagnant; a dirty green surface broken occasionally by the restless creatures inside.

There is a man on the bridge.

The train trestle is ancient and unused. Orange-red to rust, the metal beams rise up around the man like a fountain. The dark rails are smooth and embedded in splintered wood. He wears a black cowboy hat and underneath there are beads of sweat on his forehead and upper lip. His eyes are half-lidded and his lips work wordlessly. He is nearly naked; shirt off and pants around his ankles. Sweat runs down his pudgy back and buttocks; the skin reddening in the white-hot glare of afternoon. His movement is furious, repetitive. His eyes cloud over; the storm gathering and tightening.

And the rains come, falling like pearls and tears, exciting the restless creatures below.

Pressure and tightness. The flick of a tongue. Wetness. Then the sharp, delicate pain. Skin too brittle to hold together, busts apart. The slip of a tongue again—blood.

Coy Butler licks his bottom lip and stares into the mirror. For an instant, he imagines the girl from the middle school, Larissa, kissing him. He pushes his bottom lip

out in a pout, wonders what her lips feel like against his own, and then licks the blood off again.

The door to the employee restroom opens up and Pete shuffles in, hair disheveled. There is a reprieve from the smell of stale piss and cleaners. Garlic, cheese and cooking meat briefly swirl behind the boy like invisible streamers. He moves past Coy and stands in front of the urinal, hands fumbling with the button of his pants.

“Hot one today, Coy”.

Coy quickly scrubs his hands, rinsing before the water scalds. Then, he turns off the faucet with the backs of his hands and grabs a couple of paper towels.

“You got a split lip?” Pete asks. The boy’s piss hits the porcelain bottom of the urinal as if released from a pressure hose.

“There’s a dead dog out by Goatman Bridge.”

“Oh yeah? I haven’t gone out there in ages.” Pete shakes and zips up.

“No one really does anymore.” Coy grins, blood trickling down his chin. Pete walks by quickly, bypassing the sink, and disappears into the kitchen.

The night is moist and fragrant, reminding Coy of his grandmother hanging sheets to dry. The moon is out, bone white and gleaming, but does little to push away the darkness. Streetlights have not made their way out to this part of the country yet. Trees lean in close, thick with underbrush, and the road bends away into the cacophony of crickets and mystery.

Coy loves to walk at night. He whistles and tosses a rock into the grass, listening to the dry rustles. In the dark, the illusion of wide spaces disappears and the world closes

up. The wind picks up a little, and Coy pushes back his cowboy hat to allow the breeze to cool the sweat on his forehead. In the distance, heat lightning illuminates faraway cloud tops.

“Larissa.” He says, stooping to pick up a handful of pebbles from the shoulder of the road.

The breeze shudders against him and then drops off, as if listening, waiting to hear a secret. Headlights appear from behind, pushing his shadow out into the wilderness. With a flick of his wrist, he tosses all the rocks into the trees. They scatter like buckshot.

The pickup truck is an old Chevy but still roars powerfully. It pulls up beside him, the exhaust snaking around his ankles. The passenger window rolls down and he hears a girl giggle.

“Coy.” It’s David, the kid who works at the Roger’s Hardware store across the parking lot from the pizza store.

“You heading home?” He is leaning across the lap of his girlfriend, who giggles uncontrollably and squirms. She has a young, decent face which would be pretty if she didn’t laugh so much. Her eyes are as dark as her long hair.

“Yeah,” Coy responds, scratching his cheek. “Just got off work not long ago.”

“You know, my brother’s got an old Chevy van that he’s selling. \$1200. Blue. It runs real good.”

“Oh.”

“Well, climb in back. I’ll take you home. How’s your mother doing?”

“Better. Thanks.” Coy stands on one wheel and swings his leg over the bed of the pickup, hefting his weight onto the wheel well.

The truck splits the darkness like the prow of a boat. The wind rushes by, touching his face, full of scents that are lost in the heat of the day. He closes his eyes and imagines David’s girlfriend giggling underneath him. He would love to sit on her and hold her mouth closed until her laughter fell away to alarm.

The battered Chevy slows and turns onto a dirt road full of potholes. Coy squints into the wind, picking out his mother’s house in the distance. A television flickers from one of the bedrooms but he knows that his mother is most likely asleep, usually out from her meds before the David Letterman Show is over. Beside the house is a narrow, weed-choked lane that runs underneath old pecan and oak trees to a small guest house on the property.

The truck slows and David waves out the window.

“Tell your mother I said hi.”

“Sure.”

Coy jumps from the still-moving pickup and watches the vehicle speed down the lane, dry Texas dust swirling in the devilish glow of one working taillight. He hears canned laughter coming from an open window in the house. Following the lane, he runs his hands along the tops of the knee-high grass, his memory chasing the girl.

He crosses through the deeper shadow of the house, past the sawing buzz of his mother’s snores, following the tire-worn ruts towards the back of the property. Broken bits of glass glitter like smoky diamonds.

Hopefully, tomorrow he will see Larissa again.

Coy lets himself into the house and air, stale with the vague smells of beer, body odor and something darker and richer, welcomes him, drawing him further into the recesses of his home.

Coy curls his fingers around the links in the metal fence and watches. To say it is hot would be an understatement. The sun is a burn hole from the flare of a giant's blowtorch. Behind him, cars cut through the syrupy afternoon on a four-lane skillet. Dirt and leaves hustle around like bits of char and ash. Inside, Coy feels like he is boiling.

Behind the fence is an expanse of brilliant green grass, almost too bright to look at. It rises gently at the end to a large, modern brown structure that sits over the grounds like a chaperone. The middle school students are there, dressed in purple and gray shorts and white tee shirts, the colors of their school. Their arms and legs glisten like gold in the sunlight. Some run, others walk around the red cinderblock track; cheeks, foreheads flared from the workout.

A small group of girls rounds the far corner of the track and begins the long stretch towards him. Coy holds his breath. Larissa's the one different from the others. She tries hard to fit in with the crowd even though it's not who she is. Coy hears their light laughter and feels it like a cool breeze. One of the girls notices him and elbows the others, talking in whispers. Coy follows her thin, tan legs down to her expensive shoes, her white socks barely visible above them. He licks his lips. No, she's not like these girls. They approach slower, trying to seem nonchalant but occasionally catching his eye. He imagines being able to hear the sound of their clothes brushing against their bodies.

After turning another corner, the first girl spins around. “You going to follow us to high school too, pervert?” She flips him off and the girls laugh. None of the other students appear to notice.

Turning, Coy readjusts the backpack hanging from his shoulders and walks away. Today he will ride the bus the rest of the way to work. Two blocks later, he sits on a wooden bench, tracing the sounds of her name in his head like old letters carved into a tree.

The movie is about to start. Some horror flick called *Nauhauli*, which is about a group of teenagers heading into the mountains of New Mexico for winter break to ski and snowboard. They get lost and end up being stalked by the mountain locals, who can shape-shift into various animals. It is the basic hunter—predator and prey—paradigm. He thinks about the dead dog down at the bridge and wonders how it died; if it was killed.

Coy takes a sip of his tankard-sized Coca Cola and looks around. The theater is large but only a few seats are filled. Down a few rows are a small group of girls who chatter quietly, their hair slung across the seat backs. Three guys dressed in black shirts depicting horror movies or metal bands sit off to the side, snickering and casting glances at the girls. A few kids are running around near the front of the theater.

He reaches down into the backpack at his feet, shuffling inside for a small jacket or thicker shirt. Instead, his hand brushes across the cool metal shaft of a large flathead screwdriver. Withdrawing his hand, he kicks the backpack underneath the seat next to him.

The lights dim and the commercials start playing on the massive screen. The Fantanas sing about flavored sodas while riding jet skis. *Fanta. Don't you wanta?* A few more people come in. Pete, from work, is unmistakable, his brown hair in that damned cowlick. Briefly, it casts a monstrous silhouette against the screen. His friend is tall, skinny and has a girl's haircut. His pants are too tight. They hold hands. The boys in black snicker loudly. Pete makes eye contact with Coy and flashes a white grin.

Coy sips his drink, buries his hand in the buttery softness of his popcorn. The movie starts. Images flash across the screen. Darkness. Impending danger. The flash of white teeth. Blood. He thinks about the screwdriver. He sips and chews, sometimes holding it all in his mouth until he can swallow again.

Now, it is early evening and the heat that holds against the earth all day lifts some. The sky is light pink and baby blue, the clouds thin and far away. Coy strolls down a small dirt lane, surveying the empty thicket along one side and the scattered spacious houses on the other. The bottoms of his pants legs are damp and his boots and backpack are splattered with drying mud. He carries his favorite book; a worn hardback copy of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Someone left it on the bus and he reads it occasionally, sometimes out loud. He shifts the book around in his sweaty palm.

"Hey!"

Coy stops and drops a handful of rocks, his cowboy hat pivoting as he searches for the source of the voice.

"Over here!"

It's a teenage girl in one of the big yards ahead. She's seated in a wooden tree swing. The ropes reach far up into the massive oak tree sprawling over the corner of the property. She wears a tee-shirt and has a towel draped over her waist; her bare legs swing back and forth to move the swing.

Coy takes a few steps towards her and then catches his breath.

"I've seen you before." She looks at him curiously.

"Yeah." She's beautiful. He doesn't remember walking to the edge of the property. Bending down, he picks up a handful of rocks, pinning the book to his chest.

"What's your name?"

"Coy."

"That's a strange name for a boy. Why do you come up to the school, Coy?" She starts to swing gently, pumping her legs. Her toenails are the color of cotton candy.

"I like to watch." He tosses a stone across the street. She laughs—a nervous titter. "It's on my way to work. Sometimes, I just waste time before my shift starts."

"The pizza place?" she asks. "Do you walk everywhere?"

"Mostly." He tosses another stone. Her tee shirt is wet and he can see the green of her bathing suit beneath.

"Don't you ever want to get out of here? I mean go somewhere?"

Coy cocks his head. "I've never really thought about it, I guess."

"What's that?" she asks, pointing to the book underneath his arm.

"Just a book I found."

In the heavy silence, Coy tosses the last stone and wipes his hand on his shirt. The girl continues to swing, back and forth, rising and falling, her eyes never leaving his

face. He blushes, mind racing, and looks around. He can hear faint laughter and music in the distance.

“Do you live here?” he asks, motioning towards the house. It is a newly built plantation-style house, set far back from the road and mostly sheltered by trees.

“No.”

“Rissa, there you are.” Another girl runs across the lawn, clad in a black one-piece swimsuit.

“This is Bethany’s place. I live further down. She’s having a pool party today.” She glides to a stop and smiles. Bethany covers her small breasts with one arm and stares at Coy, her mouth falling open in recognition.

“Larissa, it’s the pervert from school!”

“This is Coy.”

Coy tips his hat like the guys do in all the Westerns. He notices the water still running down Bethany’s torso and legs, drawing goose bumps across her skin.

“I think we should go back inside. You shouldn’t be talking to him. He’s old, Larissa.”

“Ancient,” Larissa says, laughing. “What are you? Forty-something? No? Thirty-something?”

“I’m twenty-eight.”

“You don’t act twenty-eight.”

“Let’s go.” Bethany pulls on Larissa’s arm but she doesn’t budge. She looks frightened, peering between the house and Coy.

“I’ll be in in a minute.”

“Fine.” She sprints towards the house.

“I should probably go,” Coy says.

“What do you like to watch, Coy? At school.” She peers from behind one rope, her forehead resting on it. Her lips are like little cherries.

Coy squints down the road towards where night is swiftly drawing close. Somewhere, a dog barks. He shifts his weight, the backpack pulling like deadweight.

“Well?”

Coy stares into her eyes, her deep brown eyes, and sees playfulness there. Her mouth is cruel welcome, not quite a smirk.

“You. I watch you.”

Larissa starts to swing again, pumping her legs higher and faster. She rises into the air, falling, climbing, working herself into the breath of night. Her towel flutters to the ground and Coy catches the edge of it. She swings higher and giggles, tossing her head back to let her hair sweep across the ground. He gapes at the tight wedge of material between her legs.

“I’m only sixteen. Well, will be very soon.” She giggles again. “Does that bother you?”

“No.”

“Bethany’s father is coming,” she says, almost musically. Coy looks towards the house. Two men stride across the lawn with Bethany in tow, pointing.

“See you around, Coy.”

Coy turns and races down the darkening, unknown road, his hanging pack beating in cadence with his heart. Behind him, they stand in silhouette at the base of the tree, the girl undulating beneath the great boughs.

The windows of his house are open and the morning breeze tries its best to cool off the interior, thrusting through the screen, fluttering curtains and scraping across their nude, sweating bodies. She is making a lot of noise but Coy doesn't try to silence her. Instead, he pushes deeper and harder, working the moans out of the girl who is clutching his back, his buttocks. She shudders and then gasps as if loosening a great sigh.

He closes his eyes and pretends that it is Larissa who is beneath him. Almost instantly, he begins to ejaculate violently.

There is a noise, a brief jiggle of a lock turning and then the old wooden door is pulled open. Morning light rushes in to illuminate them and Coy knows what is happening. The sharp intake of breath. A silence that lasts forever and isn't long enough.

"Coy. Coy Butler," the tired voice says. She's out of breath.

"Hello, missus Butler." Nettie says, smiling at the large woman in the door.

"Mom!" His face is red and he quickly rolls off the girl, grabs his clothes. Nettie pulls the sheet up to her chin.

"What are you doing here?" Coy asks.

"You're killing your old mother," she gasps. She leans her large girth against the door frame.

“You shouldn’t be out of bed, Ma. Where’s Uncle Harris?” Coy pulls on his pants.

“You’re killing me.”

“I’ll go get your chair. Just a minute.” Coy jogs up to the house and enters the back door, letting the screen slam behind him. Somewhere, a television weeps with soap operatic music. The wheelchair is in the kitchen, beside the window that faces towards the guest house.

He rolls the chair back along the tired ruts of the driveway. She is waiting outside beside the open door, her eyes in the dirt.

“Why do you do this? Huh, ma? Why do you walk all the way out here? It must have taken you half the morning and you shouldn’t even be out of bed.”

“I don’t like her.”

She puts her arms around him for support while he tries to angle her towards the chair. Finally, she falls ungracefully into the seat.

“Just a minute.” He disappears into his home, returning a moment later.

“I don’t like her, Coy.”

“I told her to go home.” He pushes her slowly, grunting with effort to roll the old metal chair over the uneven ground.

“She’s a retard, Coy. What? Are you going to have retarded babies?” She tires to look over her shoulder at him. Her reddened eyes plead from her plump face.

“I’ll be a grandmother of retards.”

“She’s not retarded, mom. She has a learning disability, that’s all. She has some personality problems.”

“She’s retarded. I don’t want to see her over here again.”

“Where’s Uncle Harris?”

“He took a walk.”

Coy pushes the chair up the back ramp and into the dark house. Accidentally, he runs into a corner table containing several small porcelain dogs. A couple fall over onto their sides and faces; tails and noses against the doily. The old linoleum in the kitchen crackles as the hard rubber on the wheels move along the floor. Uncle Harris stands with the refrigerator door open, twisting the top off a beer.

“For breakfast?” Coy asks. He brings the chair to rest beside the dining room table.

“What was Francine doing outside the house?” Harris takes a long gulp, keeping his eye on him.

“It’s okay,” Francine says. Her face is pale and drawn.

“This is your mother. She’s not always going to be around, you know? You need to take better care of her.”

“Where were you?” Coy asks.

“Hey,” Harris says, pointing at him with the beer in his hand. “Don’t get smart with me.”

“I didn’t ask her to walk all the way to the guest house.”

“She walked?” He set the bottle down. “She has a heart condition!”

“Please, Coy. Go and get my meds.”

“Sometimes I don’t know what’s wrong with you.”

Coy walks through the museum-like rooms containing porcelain figures and vintage dolls. The walls are heavy with shelves full of figures, statues, and carvings. They all stare at him, their eyes constantly watching, questioning until he finds her prescriptions beside her bed. Then, more from memory, he retraces his steps back through the musty house, across the wooden floors that creak and groan under his weight.

“But everyone in the county knows that girl is retarded! He’s not a boy anymore, Francine,” Harris says. They both look up at him as he returns. Dust motes circle uneasily over their heads creating dirty halos.

Outside the window, Nettie picks her way beneath the canopy of trees, the sheet clutched against her lower half.

Above that stagnant body of green water, Coy stands with one hand on the metal bridge and the other holding the towel Larissa dropped. He has it draped around his head for protection from the sun. From somewhere nearby, the odor of ripeness, rot and decay slides across the ground. It is endless October and the hottest day of the year but there are thunderheads on the horizon, billowing up and shaking fists at the heavens. Soon.

The air is heavy. Coy licks his lips, tastes sweat.

He leans forward, staring at his reflection twenty feet below. The riverbank, undergrowth, trees and the sky bend, lean in close with him, listening. Waiting.

He circles the school again, driving slower, scanning the faces of students as they weave across the lot, load busses and climb into vehicles. Coy checks his watch. School

already let out over twenty minutes ago and these were just the stragglers. He nudges the blue Chevy van into a parking space next to a telephone pole and lets it idle.

In the west, the sky is a spreading bruise, dark and swollen. He glances at their approach and checks his watch again. A knock on the driver's window startles him. It is a black woman in a uniform—school security. He rolls down the window, smelling the promise of rain, indifference.

“Excuse me, sir.” Her face is slack; unreadable. In one hand, she holds a tablet of paper with his license plate number on it.

“Yes?”

“Are you waiting for someone? A son or daughter?” He can see that she doesn't believe he is old enough to have a son or daughter at this school.

“Yes,” Coy replies. She waits, her eyes taking in the van as much as possible.

“My sister.”

“Who?”

“Huh?”

“Who is she?” She enunciates each word carefully. “A name. I can radio and find out where she is, sir.”

He doesn't say anything. Instead, he continues to watch the young faces leaving the school. None seem to notice the threatening clouds looming overhead.

“I'm going to have to ask you to leave. Sir.” She taps on the van with long fingernails.

Four blocks ahead, a black and white patrol car pulls to a stop at a sign. They both wait and watch the car turn away, slinking through the streets cautiously. Coy slides the van into gear.

“Have a nice day, sir.”

The nearest 7-11 is packed, full of kids out of school. Parents gas up before the storm. Coy waits patiently and purchases two cherry Slurpees. Back at the van, he puts the frozen drinks inside and places the change in the metal box on the passenger seat. Inside, there is still over a thousand dollars in various bills.

Coy drives towards home, passing the familiar areas that he prefers to walk. He drives slowly, as if taking a motorized stroll. The big blue van turns onto a dirt road, kicking up clouds of dust to turn red in the hateful sky. Coy passes Bethany’s house at a crawl. The rising wind makes the trees sigh and the swing shakes back and forth. The yard is deserted.

He drives further down, crossing almost-forgotten roads towards the railroad tracks. Here, the houses are smaller and most are weary with age. Some lean, tired of the fight with gravity. Ready to pull a U-turn, Coy sees her walking, head down. Blue jeans and a tee shirt. Her brown hair, normally down to the middle of her back, flutters like clothing on a wash line.

“Hey,” he says through the open windows. She turns and looks while he puts the vehicle in park. Fear lights up her face. He leans over the empty seat, smiling.

“Need a lift?”

“You look different without your cowboy hat,” she says. Coy runs a hand through his hair.

“Yeah. It’s in the back though.” He gestures to the rear of the van. She leans in close to the window and squints against the grit-filled wind.

“I thought you didn’t drive.” She bites her lip.

“I was thinking... well, you got me thinking. Maybe I ought to leave town. Even if it’s just for a little while.”

From the Slurpee, his teeth are red behind the smile. She brushes back a few strands of errant hair, still biting her lip.

“Do you want to go with me?” Thunder rolls low and deep, barely audible over the hissing trees in throe.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Coy.” She shivers.

“What? But I thought...”

“I better get home.”

“Wait. Wait.” He opens the door and crosses to her. “This is for you.” He holds out the Slurpee. She looks at it and then brings her eyes back to his.

“I don’t want it.”

Coy looks down at his outstretched hand, at the contents melting inside the cup.

“It’s only a drink.”

“I said no thanks.” Thunder resonates more loudly now, tumbling on the edge of the storm front.

“Fine. OK. But at least let me give you a lift. Storm’s coming,” he says.

“There’s even a mattress in back if you are tired.”

A clap of thunder ricochets across the city, followed by the first icy wind of the season. It plunges from towering heights inside the clouds and carries away the rush of harsh and hateful words, things that Coy never thought Larissa could say, whipping them up and over the power lines and along the storm-deserted streets.

Coy studies the anger and fear in her face. There is hail in her eyes. This is not the Larissa of his dreams. This is not the Larissa of yesterday even.

She clutches her book bag fiercely, trembling, one hand itching to slide inside, find a weapon for defense even. Coy thinks about his backpack in the rear of the van, the hidden screwdriver. He shakes his head, trying to dislodge any violent thoughts.

The dazzling appearance of blinding light, purple and white, veins the heavens and kisses earth somewhere beyond the abandoned tracks. Larissa suddenly bolts, cutting across a vacant yard and disappearing through a hole in a wooden fence leaving Coy alone and shaking.

“Myself am hell,” Coy whispers.

He stands there until fat, frosty drops sting his skin.

Again, in the van with the windows open and the rain rushing in, Coy threads the vehicle through the flooding streets, out past the city limits, searching for the girl who will never be there. He pushes the van harder, faster, working out the kinks until it feels like he is either flying or falling. He puts his cowboy hat on; it feels like home. He licks his lips. Pressure. Tightness. There will be others.

And the rains come.